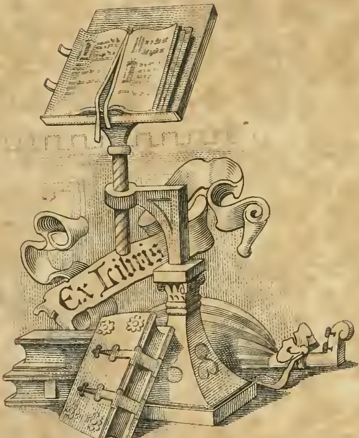

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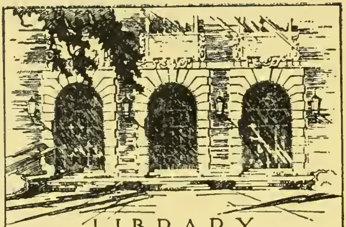

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CHAPTER V.

HOW THE MAIL CAME IN.

THIS New-Year's Day was considered by the Mon Désir party as in no way differing from any other New-Year's Day. As usual, there was open house so far as the resources of the establishment allowed: so many beds, so many sofas, so many mattresses, so many guests. They came; they feasted, talked, sang, and rejoiced; there was abundance of talk, with the popping of corks innumerable; there was the prettiest girl in the whole island to court, compliment, and tease. When the brief holiday was over they all went away again to their respective work. That is what happened every New-Year's Day. All things in Palmiste go on as if they were to last for ever, or to recur for ever on the usual day. And certainly no one could have suspected that a time so festive, gay, and irresponsible would bring with it the cause of a revolution—nothing short of a revolution—for the lives of half the people in the party.

When the Professor, after the fruitless hunt for cameron, sought the verandah of the house, he perceived, being with his spectacles nearly as good as other people without, that something had happened or was about to happen.

First of all, the English mail was in, and there was present the Captain of the mail himself, who had just come out, and was sitting in great contentment in one of the easiest of the chairs. The Squire, whose face was troubled, was holding a letter in one hand and the *Home News* in the other. First he read the letter through, then he read a page or two of the newspaper, then he turned to the letter again, and then he went back to the paper; evidently he was thinking more of the letter than of the printed page. The two elder ladies sat with tears in their eyes, holding each a hand of Virginie, who stood before them, pale and troubled, as if she was going to be offered up in sacrifice. What could be the matter? Captain Ferrier stood apart, with a small packet of open letters in his hand, occupied with his own thoughts, and they seemed as gloomy as those which had distorted his features in the early morning.

Something was certainly going to happen. As a rule, the excitement of the mail lasts from the first appearance of the signals on the Signal-hill until the issue of the slip into which the news of the whole month is condensed by the Editor of the *Commercial Gazette.* This summary, which is all that anyone wants to see, varies in length from four inches to six inches and a half. Think of getting your news for a whole month condensed into six inches of letterpress! All the great people in the world, the Bismarcks, and the Gladstones, and the Gambettas; all the ministers, statesmen, generals, Parliament men, eloquent speakers, persuasive preachers, convincing writers, mischievous demagogues, restless agitators, misleading-article men, poets, prigs, dramatists, historians, novelists, actors, artists, Big Rag, Little Tag, and Bobtail—all over the habitable globe toil and moil with the utmost diligence for four weeks in every human tongue, and the result of the whole can be boiled down into a six-inch slip! And even that does not prove that the world has been advanced by one sixth of the length of that slip. The monthly spectacle of a whole world feverishly busy, and doing nothing, is of itself, without considering the climate, sufficient to account for the philosophic calm and resolute inaction of the Palmiste natives. 'Why all this care?' they say. 'Nothing comes of it. Only sometimes knocking of heads together; tumults, broken bones, revolutions, and wars, with loss of property and triumph of the wrong side. Sit down, neighbours, and let us tell each other pleasant stories, and make merry while we may, until the night falls, when we are fain to go to sleep.'

The perusal of the slip finished, the excitement instantly dies away. Everybody reads the same papers, the *Overland Mail*, the *Home News*, and the *Illustrated London News*; some go so far as to read the *Saturday Review* and *Punch*, or the *Spectator*. But they are few; therefore, since no one can boast of any information but that which is open to his neighbours, there is no inducement to talk politics; and since no more information can come for a whole month, there is no inducement to speculate.

The captain of the mail-steamer arrived, then, about four of the clock, bringing with him the monthly packet of letters and papers for the whole party.

'I heard,' he said, 'who was out here, and I waited for the post to be opened, and so brought all their letters, as well as yours, Captain Kemyss. And how goes it with you and yours, and how is the pretty maid?'

He had been on the line a good many years, and Virginie was still for him his pretty maid, and he was a privileged guest at Mon Désir, to come and go as often as he pleased and was able.

Then he sat down and rested while the letters were read.

There were two for Captain Kemyss—his correspondence with the mother-country, after so many years of exile, had dropped by degrees, and was now almost reduced to nothing; one for Madame Ferrier—a very unusual circumstance; one for Virginie, who had never had a letter from England before; five or six for Captain Ferrier; two for the Professor; half a dozen for the Padre; a pile for the others; and a vast quantity of newspapers, *Punches*, monthly magazines, books and pamphlets for everybody.

The first of the two letters which Captain Kemyss opened was from a certain cousin of his, a country gentleman of the Midland counties, and was respecting Tom. 'My advice,' said the writer, 'is to keep the boy where he is. Let him stick to the thing that he knows. As for sugar-planting being precarious, it has kept you for thirty years, and I dare say it will keep him. England is not a good country just now, especially for men like me, who have a dozen farms on their hands;' and so on—and so on—a letter which does not concern us.

Captain Kemyss laid it down with a sigh. He had hoped that perhaps some chance might have been found for Tom when the crash, so long imminent, should come at last. Then he took up the other letter, which was in a writing strange to him. When, now a dozen years and more agone, his guardianship of Virginie began, there was a second guardian, also one of Captain Ferrier's brother-officers, who had sold out, and was then living at Southsea. It was understood that he was to hold an honorary office, and that the child would continue to live with her mother at Mon Désir, while Captain Kemyss managed her estate. So honorary was the office that the acting guardian had almost forgotten the existence of his coadjutor, and had not even learned that he was dead.

The letter was from his widow, and was as follows :—

'Dear Sir,—

'As the widow of your old friend and brother-officer, one who was associated with you in the office of guardian to Miss Ferrier, I trust I need no introduction or excuse for addressing you.'—'So Jack is dead, is he,' said the reader, stopping to look at the signature. 'Poor Jack! I had almost forgotten him.'—'Circumstances have not allowed me, until lately, to offer any hospitality to my ward, if I may call her so. I am now, however, I rejoice to say, at last in a position to discharge one at least of the duties accepted for me by my late husband.'—'He married—I heard that he married—I forget who she was,' said the Squire, stopping again at this point to recall things, 'somebody of good family, I know—and she had expectations. Let me see. They were hard up when I heard last—lived in a cottage at Southsea; that must have been twelve years ago. Then Jack died, I suppose, and she's come into the money at last. I suppose that is what she means.' He went on with the letter—

'I believe that our dear Virginie—or Lucie—forgive me if the name has escaped my memory—must now be seventeen years of age. I hear from the Colonel, of the 180th, just returned from your lovely island, that she is perfectly charming and perfectly beautiful. I have also learned, to my great satisfaction, that you have so well nursed her estate that she is now a considerable heiress. Now, my dear sir, do you not think it would be a great pity that this young lady, while she is still young, with her affections free, should not come to England and make acquaintance with her own people? I have the honour of knowing Miss Ferrier. I was talking on this subject to her on the last occasion of meeting her. I am happy to inform you that she expressed herself in the kindest manner concerning her unknown cousin, and will, I am sure, show her all the attention when she comes home that she can desire or expect. As for me, I do not disguise the fact that I should like to have a young and beautiful girl staying with me, partly because it is pleasant to have young and pretty faces about one, and partly because they make a house attractive and bring people about one. Others may hunt for lions; it is my principle, my dear Captain Kemyss, that men care more for lionesses. When I get my fair Creole in my drawing-room I shall not let her go in a hurry.

'As regards matrimonial prospects, you may entirely trust me. I will stop the first sign of a flirtation in the very bud, unless the man is thoroughly what you have a right to expect. There are not so many men of the right kind in this town, especially since the terrible blight that has fallen upon landowners; yet there may be some. Of course, I know there are many dangers which beset a girl of fortune or expectations. London is always abounding in penniless adventurers, literary men, subalterns, younger sons, and even curates, who are longing to marry an heiress and hang up their hats and sit down idle for life. But they shall not get near our Virginie. I will surround her, my dear Captain. I will be like a hollow square with fixed bayonets, until the right man approaches, and then I will be a benevolent Fairy. Of course, with a girl of good —almost of noble—birth, who has none but good relatives—I think I have heard that her mother belongs to the House of Desmarets d'Auvergne —who has also a great and productive sugar estate—with, the Colonel said, a hundred and twenty thousand pounds, but perhaps that is too good to be true—should look very high indeed. There is nothing to which she may not aspire to, though if we dream of a coronet we should be sober; our thoughts ought not to run higher than an earl or a viscount. However, I will do my best. Character, of course, as well as position, should be carefully inquired into.

'I have written honestly to you, because if you were really a private friend of my late husband you must be a man of the world. I frankly think that my offer is a good one, and that in the interests of the girl you ought not to refuse it. If her mother lives, my invitation will extend to her; but, on the whole, I sincerely think it will be better that the child should come alone, and acquire, by living entirely among English people, the ideas, the air, and the tone of English society.

'I hope to have a favourable answer by return mail. I am ready to receive my charge to-morrow, if she can come. If a chaperon can be found, the arrival of my ward in person would be the most favourable reply possible.

'I remain, dear Captain Kemyss,
'Yours, very sincerely,
'LAURA HALLOWES.'

The squire read this frank and plain-spoken letter through twice. The tone of it struck his ears, long unfamiliar with the world of fashion, discordantly. His ward was to go to London, and stand in the matrimonial market with other girls, saying, 'Behold me! I am rich, beautiful, young, of gentle birth. I will take a coronet in exchange for myself.' Yet the letter was honest; also, the invitation was one which ought not to be lightly refused. It was right that the girl should go to England; it was part of her education. She ought, as Mrs. Hallowes suggested, to make the acquaintance of her own people; she ought to go while yet young, with her affections free. And at this point, he said, with a sigh, 'Poor Tom!' and read the letter again. Evidently the letter of a woman of society—of the world; and probably a woman who would make social capital out of her rich young heiress. Yet, what harm would that do Virginie?

At this point he folded the letter and raised his eyes. A singular pantomime was going on.

First, his own wife took a letter from Madame Ferrier's hands, and read it. Then both ladies and Virginie gazed upon each other in a kind of stupor. Then Madame Ferrier held out her arms, and the girl fell into her maternal embrace.

'Child,' murmured the mother, 'can I let thee go? So soon? So soon?'

'Sybille?' said her friend, speaking the language of her youth, 'we must let her go. It is for the child's own good; we are two simple Creole ladies, who have never left the island and never shall. But Virginie has English cousins; she must visit her father's country, she should learn to love his home. Virginie, child of my heart, what sayest thou?'

'What can I say?' she replied. 'Oh! what can I say?'

'It was thy father's wish, my dear,' her mother went on. 'He spoke continually of taking thee to England when thou wast *grandie*.'

'It is I,' said her guardian, 'who should have thought of it. My dear, the time has passed so swiftly that I forgot you were grown up. I ought to have remembered that it was due to you that you should go home for a while—for a while'—he repeated. 'We must let you go.' He took her hands and bent over her with his kindly smile. 'We cannot bear to part with you, my dear; but, if your mother consents, we must let you go. May I see those letters?'

One of them was from Mrs. Hallowes to Madame Ferrier, conveying to her the same invitation as she had made to Captain Kemyss, but in different terms. For she said nothing about society or matrimonial projects and ambitions; but dwelt upon the advantage to the young lady of seeing England, and spoke of her own as a quiet home among a circle of quiet friends; and she also dwelt upon the advantages to be derived in the way of music, art, and so forth.

'She must be, indeed,' thought the Squire, 'a woman of the world.'

The other letter was from Virginie's second cousin, Maude, daughter of Lord Ferrier and sister of the man on the verandah, who was scowling over his letters. It was a very short letter, but kindly :—

'Dear cousin,' she wrote, 'I learn from Mrs. Hallowes, the widow of one of your guardians, that she has invited you to pay a visit to England next year. I sincerely hope that your mother may let you come, even if she does not herself accompany you. Remember that you have cousins who would like to make your acquaintance.

'Your father was at school with mine, his first cousin. I have heard a great deal about you and your beautiful country home already from my brother, and I assure you that I look forward to making your acquaintance with a very great deal of pleasure. We spend most of our time at The Towers, but generally have two months in London. Wherever we are, when you are able to leave Mrs. Hallowes, come and stay with us, as soon as you can.

'Your affectionate cousin, MAUDE.'

These were the three letters which fell like so many bombs into the peaceful verandah on that sunny afternoon. And this it was which, when the Professor arrived, was making his host read the *Home News* with eyes which read indeed but saw not, and turned again to the letter.

'A Coronet,' he murmured; 'but why not? Poor Tom! Yet, would it have been right—would it have been honest—to take advantage of her innocence and ignorance before she knows the world? Let her go. And Tom must take his chance. A poor chance, indeed! Rank against rusticity. Fashion against fidelity; the lover of the town against the sweetheart of the country.'

Virginie's cousin, meanwhile, had opened two letters. One of them was from his sister. He read it hurriedly, and crammed it into his pocket as if it made him angry. What it said was this:—

'Dearest Guy,—I hear from two or three people who know, or ought to know, that our Creole cousin is rich, young, and beautiful. Also that she has manners which would fit her for any station. And that she is coming home to stay with a woman who wants her, I believe, as a help to get on in society. The woman, however, is very well, and will take the girl to good houses. I have taken notice of her *for your sake*—mind, *for your sake*—and because such a woman may, in certain cases, be very useful to you. Now, Guy, be reasonable. You tell me that you are in desperate straits. It is now six years, or thereabouts, since these desperate straits began. I do not reproach you; but I remind you that you have had, not only your own allowance, but all my money, and all that I could persuade my father to add. He does not know of these straits; if he did he would ask you how they are caused. *I do know*, Guy. Again, I do not reproach you. I will even go on trying to help you, though I know that every ten-pound note we get for you will only go the same way as its predecessor. Now, consider carefully. When you were at home last summer I caught an heiress and got her here on purpose for you to meet her. You remember her. She was not, I own, in the least degree beautiful, nor was she clever at all; and I did not expect that you would fall in love with her; but she was rich and she was amiable, and she was ready to fall in love with you. And men in desperate straits cannot always marry anybody they please. But you would not have her, although you were in such straits. Now, here is this other girl. Come home immediately, on urgent private affairs. Come home, if you can, in the same steamer with her; make fierce love to her all the way home. When she goes to Mrs. Hallowes', let it be with your engaged ring on her finger. When you get her money you can pay off your creditors, even if you only begin a fresh course of madness. There, Guy; that is all I can do for you at present. I have only to add that the times are bad for everybody who has got land, and therefore for us. And it is not the least use expecting any further assistance from your father, or from your affectionate sister, MAUDE.'

'Then,' murmured the young man, 'how the devil is Morgan's I O U to be taken up?'

The other letter was written in a less clerkly hand, and there were occasional mis-spellings in it. And it was this letter which made the young man scowl.

'I told you, Guy,' it began, without any polite or conventional endearments of speech; 'I told you that I would let you know from time to time what I am doing and how I am doing. Very well, then. I am doing very well. And so is the boy. He is not like you, I am glad to say, as yet; in face he takes after me and his grandfather, the scene-shifter, who was once a very handsome man; and I hope he will never become like you in any single respect. And, as I am not quite a lady myself, though more so than when you knew me, I have got a girl who *is* a lady to act as his governess and companion. By the time the child grows up and can compare, I shall, I dare say, have become more like a lady, because I do not want him ever to be ashamed of his mother. An actress I am, and shall remain. Ten pounds a week, my gallant Captain, your wife draws. She's got her marriage lines safe; but nobody knows that she's the Honourable Mrs. Ferrier. Biz is first-rate. We have got a piece good for six hundred nights, and the ghost walks regular. Portraits of your wife are sold whereever she goes—character-portraits, looking in the glass, tying a handkerchief round her head, in a riding habit—all sorts—and she gets letters, offers of marriage, bouquets, and applause, and everything which the heart of an actress can desire. So that she is quite happy. And the boy is so beautiful that she does not so very much repent having fallen in your way. And, as for his rights, why, whatever you do, you can't gamble them away. I do not want ever to see you again, nor to hear from you. The Army List will tell me where you are, which is all I want to know. And, on the least attempt at interference with my boy, we go to The Towers—accompanied by our own people, the respectable scene-shifter—and we see my lord, and we introduce the daughter-in-law and the grandchild. It is a good situation, and I think I should play it rather well. I remain, your wife, not at all affectionate, Violet Lovelace—it is a swell name, and I found it in the Court Guide—but it is not so good as my own real name, which is, as you very well know, Emily Ferrier.'

When Captain Ferrier had got through the whole of this epistle, which did not take long, he fell into a study, in which everything became a nocturne, an arrangement in black. He was roused by the arrival of the Professor, against whom, for some unknown reason, he had conceived a violent and irrational hatred. He glared at him for a moment, and then strode hastily away. First he walked along the avenue of palms, and when he got to the end of it he swore aloud; then, by way of distraction, he went to the stable to look at his horse, and swore again, and if his syce had been in the place it would have been bad for that poor Indian. But he was not. The man was at the moment with the old witch of Endor bargaining for a charm which should slowly poison a horse, so that no one would suspect what was the matter with him, and an honest groom should not get into trouble. The terms of the transaction were amicably arranged, and the charm, which was to take the form of a little something to pour among the oats, was promised, on condition that this estimable person should pay for it beforehand—because he could write—in forged passes, by means of which the old woman afterwards made much money and helped many of her friends to deceive the police.

We may here observe that, among the many things which once done cannot be recalled, perhaps the most fatal is such a thing as Guy Ferrier did when he was just twenty-one years of age, being then a young gentleman of very headstrong disposition, and fully determined upon having all he wanted, at any cost. He had always from childhood acted upon this principle, and it made him so popular at school, that when he left the boys proposed to have fireworks. In the Army he continued to act on the same settled principle, being now quite certain that he deserved to have all he wanted; and he was so much beloved, therefore, that when it became known, directly after the arrival of this mail, that Ferrier was going home on urgent private affairs—presumably the raising of money to pay his debts of honour—his brother-officers so far sympathised with him as to give thanks unanimously that he was going to enjoy a holiday. It was upon this principle, also, being at the moment consumed and inflamed with passion, that, at the age of twenty-one, he entered secretly into the bonds of holy wedlock with a certain 'young person' named Emily Hicks. She was quite young, extremely pretty, quick, and clever, well able to take care of herself, almost uneducated, the daughter of a scene-shifter or carpenter and 'general service' theatrical man, and she was just commencing a dramatic career, which now promises to be distinctly successful, when this thing happened to her.

The interruption to her professional pursuits lasted rather more than a year. She then returned to Daddy Perigal, and informed him that for the future she should never again speak to her husband, nor take money from him, nor in any way own him; that she should go back to the stage in her first-assumed name; but, for the sake of the child, whom she brought with her, whose rights must be watched, she would assume her legal name when the boy should be grown up. She therefore returned to the stage under her old acting name, and began to work just as hard as if she were still really Emily Hicks, with her future before her, instead of the Hon. Mrs. Ferrier, a woman married and done for.

As for her husband, he went his own way, and contrived, as a rule, to forget her existence, except when he was reminded of it by such a letter as he had just read, or by his sister's well-meant attempts to find him an heiress. Between himself and an heiress there always stood this woman and her boy. At first, he suffered from great apprehensions that she would communicate with his own people. As she did not, he gradually recovered confidence in her word. He could not marry; that was true; but then he did not want to marry. The goddess of Chance was the only bride he cared to worship; some day, most certainly, if Emily lived and the boy lived, there would be a row. Meanwhile, so long as she let him alone, he troubled himself little about her. When his thoughts were turned upon her by such letters as he had just received he realised how bitterly he hated the woman.

'We are going to have a sad change, Professor,' said Captain Kemyss. 'Virginie is to leave us and to go to England.'

'Virginie will go away?' This was, indeed, a change.

'Yes: she had another guardian besides myself, though I had almost forgotten it: she is invited, and we think we ought to let her go: we hope it will not be for long. But who knows? who knows?'

There were letters, too, for the Professor. Among them one which seemed to cause him much agitation.

'Come home at once,' it said, among other things. 'The longer you stay away, the more difficult will it be for you to get what you want. Come, and you shall join the ranks of the penniless adventurers and make a spoon or spoil a horn.'

When they met at dinner, a certain sadness weighed upon their minds. The dinner was silent; for now they all knew what was going to happen, and that the party would be broken up, never, perhaps, all to meet again. Virginie was going to England—the child who had grown up among them. Why, McLoughlin, McAndrew, and the Secretary had seen her every New-Year's Day, and plenty of days between, for seventeen years; they had watched her pass from infancy to childhood; she grew slowly, before their eyes, from a girl, imperfect, bony, angular, to a woman, perfect, rounded, marvellous. She was the joy of the house—the great and chief attraction of Mon Désir. There was no one like her in the island. And now she was to go. What—what would the place be without her?

In Palmiste one is accustomed to seeing people come and go. The officers of the garrison, naturally, are constantly changing; the Governor changes every six years or so; the chiefs of the Civil Service are always changing; and partners and clerks of mercantile houses are perpetually coming out and going home again, to say nothing of those who succumb to the extraordinary thirstiness of the place, and go prematurely to their long home. Therefore, no one was surprised to learn that Captain Ferrier was called home on urgent private affairs.

With the Professor it was different; he was liked by many; he had been in the Colony four or five years, and was regarded, though wrongly, as a permanent resident. He was an eminently cheerful soul; he played a fair hand at whist; he had at times a mordant tongue, and was good at the repression of those who, in Palmiste or elsewhere, endeavour to assert themselves over much; and he had a great fund of information and anecdote, by means of which he could enliven the dinner-tables of the plain, honest Scotch folk who mostly make up the civil society of Palmiste. It was rumoured that he wrote—no one knew what; men who had lived with him knew that he possessed, hidden away in drawers, a quantity of MSS.; that he had been known to extract one, now and then, and to read it for the benefit of his friends; so that, when the news fell upon them that he, too, was going, it was felt that his intention was to go home in order to publish those MSS. or write more.

The dinner languished. The talk was forced. The Pink Boy told about the gourami-fishing; the Padre recounted some of his sufferings on the boulders; and the Professor narrated his fruitless *chasse* of the camerons; but the Squire was dejected, the two elder ladies sad, Virginie anxious and restless, and Tom downcast. After dinner, the Squire filled his glass and gave his usual New-Year's toast.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I drink to all friends at home. Captain Ferrier, I drink the health of his Lordship. Major, Professor, McAndrew'—he bowed to each in turn in his kindly and courtly way—'to you and to yours, here and at home, I wish a happy New Year.

'It will be a strange New Year to us,' he went on, 'without our child. Virginie will go, I suppose, by this next mail; we send her to the keeping of good hands; we trust—that is, we hope—that we shall have her back among us in a year or two, when she has shaken off the rustic ways of Palmiste and learned the talk of Mayfair. But we are not afraid. Our Virginie will not forget her old friends; and for hostage, we keep Madame Ferrier with us.'

Virginie, who sat on her guardian's left, seized his hand and kissed it with tears.

'As for you, Professor,' went on the old planter, 'it's a disgraceful thing that you can't stay with us. You've got enough to live upon—what does a bookman want more? You know the foolishness of fighting; here is a haven of rest; and you must needs go back to wringle wrangle among the literary men of London. For shame, sir; for shame! Haven't we been kind to you?'

From all voices, except the two officers, there came a chorus.

'Haven't we been kind enough to you, Professor?'

'Hech, mon!' This was the expostulation of Sandy McAndrew. He felt at the moment that after the many hundreds of sherry-and-bitters, cups of cold tea, brandy-and-sodas, and vermouths taken by the Professor in the room over his office, it was ungrateful in him to go. There needed no words.

'Come with me, Virginie,' said Tom, when he could get speech of her. She went out with him into the night, looking like a white ghost upon the dark lawn.

'I want to say something to you, dear,' said Tom, 'before you go. May I say it to-night?'

'Yes, Tom. Say what you please and all you please.'

'It is this, Virginie. You are going to leave us. That is quite right. You have rich friends in England whom you ought to see. I always thought that you would go some day. And you are rich yourself. My dear, we have been so much together, all day long together for all these years, that we are almost like brother and sister, are we not?'

'Go on, Tom,' she said, with a quick perception, almost a pang at her heart, that they were not brother and sister.

'I am not clever at books,' he continued. 'The Professor is, but I am not. And I don't know how to talk about things, like your cousin. I am only a Creole, a son of the soil, a sugar-planter. But, Virginie, I want you to believe one thing.'

'I will believe anything, Tom, that you tell me to believe.'

'It is a very simple thing. It is only that I love you——'

'But I know you do, Tom.'

'And that I shall always love you, whatever you do. I mean—because, of course, whatever you do will be right and good, and the best thing that ever any girl did—that even if I hear that you have accepted some man in England, some clever man or some great man, I shall go on loving you all the same. I am what I am, Virginie; but, whatever happens, good or bad, you will remember, will you not—oh! my dear—that here, at Mon Désir, there is one man who loves you always.'

'Oh! Tom,' she said, bursting into tears. 'Why must I go to England at all? Yes; you all love me; you are all too good to me. And I wish it was over, and I was back again, and all was going on just the same as before.'

This can never be. One of the most cruel things that Time, who is always dragging and tearing something from us, does is that he will never let pleasant ways remain or renew themselves. He is always destroying. He tramps on, always a lusty youth, whose companion, as in Watts's picture, is pale Death, and beneath his feet as they go the flowers are trampled down and their grace and perfume lost. There may be—there should be always to the end—other flowers before us, but they are not the same.

And at Mon Désir this is the last of the old New-Year Days when Virginie, the sweet and innocent child, would be there to meet and greet them with her smile and her pretty soft caressing ways.

'She must go, Tom,' said his father that night, 'with her affections free.'

'Yes, sir,' he replied; 'I have told her to-night that I shall always love her; I thought I ought to tell her that before she goes. But she will go with her affections quite free, as you say.'

'Humph!' That was all Captain Kemyss said. What he thought was—What will Mrs. Hallowes say if Virginie tells her?

CHAPTER VI.

HOW THE MAIL WENT OUT.

Next morning the party broke up in sadness, and in the early morning they drove or rode away.

The earliest to go was the Professor. He appeared on the verandah with the morning tea. Tom was there in his morning rags, and Virginie in her white frock, always fresh and sweet as a lily. All three were depressed, but the saddest of all was the Professor.

'It is my last visit to Mon Désir,' he sighed. 'In a few days I shall have left the island, never to see it again.'

'If I thought,' said Virginie, 'that I should never see it again, I would not leave it.'

'My most pleasant memories,' the Professor went on, lugubriously, 'will be those of the days spent here—and of you,' he added.

'They ought to be,' said Tom, thinking of Virginie, rather than of Mon Désir, though he was narrow-minded enough to think that no place in the world could be more beautiful—which is, indeed, true. Then he got up and went off for his morning ride of inspection. Weeds grow, and coolies are lazy, and Sirdars go to sleep, even though lovely Creoles make all hearts sad by going away.

'You are ambitious,' Virginie said. 'We have always said that you would not make this colony your home. What is an ambitious man to do here? I wonder, though, whether you will be any happier in England than you might be here, if you chose to remain.'

'I dare say not,' he said, with a kind of groan, 'After all, we must not be for ever looking out for happiness. There is no place in the world where one can laze along so happily as here—nor is the claret so good anywhere, I think. But one must work, and after a time one wants to do the work one likes best.'

'Everybody is always going away,' said Virginie. 'It is sad for the people who live here. Directly we get fond of anyone he resigns or gets transferred, and so we lose him. And now I am going too. At all events, we shall go in the same ship.'

'Yes; I shall not have to say farewell until we get to England. Besides, it is a kind of satisfaction to feel that if I am going you are going too. One cannot think with any comfort of Mon Désir without you. It would be too wretched to come here and find no Virginie. To be sure, there are the ladies, and the Squire, and Tom. But, after all, they are not the principal characters in the piece. They come on the stage, you know, to be grouped round the central figure—you.'

'Thank you, Professor,' she said, smiling. 'You have always been kind to me.'

'I have always been in love with you,' he replied, with a frankness which did not displease her. She was accustomed to be loved, and regarded the Professor's assurance in much the same light as if it came from her guardian. 'Not that I presume upon that fact. It is a beautiful thing for a man like me to be in love with a girl like you. I am proud of it, and, I assure you, grateful to Providence for the magnificent privilege of being in love with such a girl as you.'

'Oh! Professor.' This incomprehensible statement confused her.

'I mean exactly what I say, though you do not understand what I mean. So long, however, as you know that I am your faithful servant, that is enough.'

'What have I done,' she asked, 'that you and Tom should both say and think such kind things about me?'

The Professor shook his head.

'You cannot yet understand,' he replied, 'your own power. But you will before long. I do not know what Tom has said, but I hope that he put his case clearly, and that you will not forget anything of what he said. Because, Virginie, sometimes words, when they are first heard, seem to mean little. But, when they are remembered, they get in course of time to acquire their full meaning. Perhaps Tom's words were like these.'

She was very young and she was very innocent. Tom's words had not been understood by her in the sense he intended—that is, not in their fullest sense; not in the sense which we who read them give to them. In other words, this child had no thought whatever of love-making, courtship, and such things.

'I remember perfectly what Tom said,' she replied, considering a little.

'Don't tell me,' he interrupted hastily. 'If you remember them, it is enough. You are going into a strange world; you will get new ideas, and see new people, and learn to think differently in many ways; and you will be far from your old friends. Wherefore, remember Tom always; and if you want counsel think of me, and let me help if I can.'

And then the Squire appeared, and the Professor presently took his leave.

Six days later, the mail steamer, lying in the harbour with her steam up, ready for her start, presented, at five o'clock in the afternoon, an animated and lively appearance. The departure of every mail is attended with plenty of bustle and crowds of visitors; but on this occasion, when, in addition to certain French families, the departures of Virginie Ferrier, her cousin, and the Professor were all to take place together, it seemed as if the whole island were going with them, so crowded were deck, and companion ladders, and saloon. On deck there were gathered little groups of sympathetic friends. French ladies were pressing their infallible nostrums against sea-sickness; there were a hundred words of last parting, of recommendation, and of warning to be given; there was the musical ripple of women's talk; there were the strident voices of Southern Frenchmen. Marseillais especially, and the soft, blurred syllables of Parisians, or those who, by clipping of syllables, would fain pass for Parisians; and there surged up from the saloon the loud laughter of the British officers who had come on board to rejoice with their brother over his departure; and the merchants and civilians who had come to mourn over the farewell of the Professor. Sorrow and joy alike demanded the alleviation or encouragement of brandy-and-soda. Continuous were the poppings of corks: loud was the shouting for the steward; higher and still higher grew the pile of empty soda-water bottles.

On deck a little court surrounded Virginie.

Among them were the Pink Boy and the Padre, both desperately in love, though their case was hopeless indeed. His Reverence, for his part, dreamed of a sympathetic helpmeet, who would admire his sermons, encourage his ambitions, and help him to show the colony an example of the active Church life. It did not occur to him that a girl brought up as Virginie had been might become many things; but ecclesiasticism was impossible for her. The Pink Boy thought how delightful a thing it would be to have Virginie with him in those hot rooms of his over the Bank, in pleasing contiguity to the guano dépôts, and the port, and the bawling crowd, always engaged in lading and unlading. And, for his part, he did not understand how such a girl could not marry such a boy as himself. They went on dreaming, however: now, for reasons which will presently appear, they will dream in this way no more. The girl was flushed with the excitement and the emotion of leave-taking. She was in charge of a French lady, who was going all the way to London. All the farewells had been said but one. There only remained, of the home circle, her guardian: her cheek was flushed, and her eyes were bright and tear-stained. She had no heart for the compliments and pretty things which one after the other came to say to her.

At last there came the time of departure.

A beautiful gradation marks the ceremony of leave-taking on board the mail. First, the comparative strangers; next, the friends; then the intimate friends; last, the members of the household.

Thus, when the officers and the merchants, and those of the French people who knew her, had offered their hands and wished Virginie *bon voyage*, and all, even the Padre and the Pink Boy, were over the side of the ship and in their boats, there remained the hardest parting of all—that with her fond and faithful guardian.

He kissed her forehead, cheeks, and lips.

'My dear,' he said, taking her in his arms, 'it is best for you. It is what your father would have wished. Why should we repine? Yet, it will be sad, indeed, without you.'

So they parted. Captain Kemyss was the last to leave the ship before the bell rang; the whistle shrieked, the screw turned, and the great ship began once more to drive its long white furrow on the main. But the old man's eyes were dim, and for a while he could not see anything.

When they cleared, he became aware that Virginie was standing aft, beside the steersman; and behind her were the Professor and her cousin, and she was waving her handkerchief and crying. At sight of her tears, the Pink Boy's eyes filled, and he choked, and then he said a wicked word to one of the boatmen, which gave him relief. And the Padre, who felt a similar inclination to choke, obtained relief by rebuking the Pink Boy for that wicked word. So they came ashore, and for many days the light of the sun was dim to them, and curry, even prawn curry, had no flavour.

It was then six o'clock, and it wanted nearly an hour to sunset.

As for Tom, the reasons why he was not on board were perfectly well known to everyone, and there was a general feeling that they did him credit. If people are in love, and are soft-hearted and cannot trust themselves to say good-bye in public, then people had better stay ashore, which Tom did. But he had his little plan in his own mind, and this is what he did.

From Mon Désir to the Signal-mountain is a good twelve miles by road. But a man with strong nerves and steady head can find a much shorter path by way of the mountains, which lie in an amphitheatre round the town.

They are rather awful hills to climb about, being provided, more plentifully than falls to the lot of most hills, with bare faces of rock and precipices and real saddle-backs, along which the rare visitor, who would get along the top, has to drag himself with a leg hanging over each side; but Tom knew the way well, and had too often achieved the feat to think about the danger. Therefore, as he intended to see the last of the girl he loved, he climbed along this break-neck ridge, and made his way to the Signal-mountain.

There is always a man on watch up there; he is provided with a telescope two yards long or so; he has a little hut half buried in the rock, and a mast provided with cross-trees and ropes for signalling the approach of ships; he is up at break of day and remains on watch till sunset. And when hurricanes come he is generally blown far away out to sea, hut, telescope, mast, and all.

Tom stood beside the hut with the telescope in his hand, and watched the departure of the steamer. First he saw the crowds on board break up and disappear over the sides, till there were only the passengers and the crew left on deck; then he saw his father, who was the last to leave; and then he saw Virginie standing at the helm waving her handkerchief. At first he could see her face, and he knew that she was weeping. The screw went round. The ship passed out of the quiet harbour waters and began to roll in the waves of the Indian Ocean. Virginie stood there still, after the point was cleared, when she could no longer see her friends, watching the receding shores of the island she had never left before. What thoughts, what memories, were in the girl's mind! Her lover remained motionless, glass in hand, while the ship grew less, and the figure on deck grew smaller, till the white dress, the last he saw of Virginie, vanished altogether. Then he watched the ship itself till the sun went down and the night fell, and ship, and sea, and all dropped out of sight. Then, with heavy heart, he slowly descended the hill. He had seen the last of Virginie. How and when would he see her again?

PART II.—IN THE SEASON.

CHAPTER I.

A ROSE OF JUNE.

On a certain morning in the sweetest month of all the twelve which either adorned, or disgraced, last year, the bright and sunny month of June, when east winds were over and thunderstorms not yet begun, the Row was thronged with those who rode, and the walks with those who did not ride but sat on chairs, or strolled up and down and talked, if they knew anybody, and looked at the crowd, and pretended to know everybody, and to belong to quite the inner circle, and deceived nobody, and came to see, and to be a part of those who were seen. On such a morning Frenchmen in London cease to complain of the endless *brouillard*, and to compare Hyde Park with the Bois ; Colonials leave off boasting of their climate —it really is too bad, the way in which Australians, for instance, throw their beautful climate in our teeth; and good Americans hesitate whether, when they die, they will not ask to go to London rather than to Paris; and financiers thank Heaven that such skies should belong to the city where the money is. As for the leaves on the trees, the golden-rain, and the lilac, the rhododendrons, and the flowers and the grass, everybody knows that they are placed in the Park like the flowers on a dinner-table, the better to set off the guests. They do not belong to nature at all, any more than the cascade at St. Cloud. They are provided by Fortnum and Mason, or some other firm, for a splendid banquet of sunshine and fair weather, to which all are invited alike, but to which none should come who are morose, envious, disappointed, and ill-natured. For these there is Regent's Park, with the daisies and the dandelions of Dame Nature.

Among those who rode was Virginie. With her were her cousins, Guy and Maude Ferrier. Six months of the strong cold English air had taken something from the delicate bloom which lay upon the cheek of the fair Creole beneath her own palms, and had given her a little of the hardy and robust look of her English sisters. Just now, flushed with the exercise and the excitement, the warm air, the soft sunshine and the animated scene about her, the girl had lost for the moment all her Creole languor, and was in very truth become an English girl in appearance. Whether she lost or gained by the difference I do not know. Certainly, of all the young and beautiful women in the Park that morning there was none, English or otherwise, more beautiful than this fair Creole, a fact observed by many of those philosophers who love to lean over the railings and meditate in the midst of youth, beauty, wealth, flowers, gay and careless talk, on the happiness lying ready to hand for virtuous people in the best of all possible worlds. Especially, if virtuous people find their own happiness in witnessing the joy of others. Captain Ferrier was master of several accomplishments, besides the art of card-playing and gambling; among other things, he could ride well, and looked his best on horseback. Beside him rode his sister, also an accomplished horsewoman. Mounted, she looked handsome, being tall and of graceful figure. When she dismounted you perceived, first, that she was no longer very young, being, in fact, four years older than her brother, and he was twenty-eight; next, she was thin, and her pale face, with its large and lustrous eyes, wore an anxious look, as if she was continually suffering for the sins of others—which, indeed, was her hapless case. This expression of face is more often found in women than in men, because the manly mind does not set its hopes too much on the achievements of other men; and when you see it you may be very sure that husbands, sons, or brothers have 'turned out bad.' For the moment, however, she, too, felt happy, because it seemed at last as if a thing on which she had set all her hopes was really likely to take place.

'Make love to her on board.'

That was Maude's injunction to her brother when she wrote to him in Palmiste Island. Captain Ferrier would, perhaps, have obeyed, but for one circumstance: he found on board a young fellow who was as fond of cards as himself; and he preferred playing écarté or picquet in the smoking-cabin, for'ard, to dangling after his cousin on the after-deck. Besides, he could not present himself, except as a sort of rival—good Heavens! a rival—to that fellow, Percival. Now Percival, who certainly was not the son of a peer, but had started quite as a second-class passenger in life, and was by no means desirous of passing himself off as anything better, was for some unknown reason peculiarly hateful to this young man; the more so, because Virginie in his society seemed always more happy than in his own. But, indeed, it is absurd to account for the hatreds and jealousies of selfish men, because they are terribly vain, and brood, and take imaginary offence, and magnify their own importance, and do not see the proportions of things; so that they become very thorough haters indeed. If their lives were spared long enough, they would end by hating all the world. The disposition of those long-lived Patriarchs Mahaleel and that of his more distinguished great-grandson, are not stated: but if they were as selfish as Guy Ferrier, one perceives clearly how for the last two or three hundred years of their lives they would have regarded the whole of mankind with an unrelenting hatred. It has been suggested, or dreamed, or told after revelation by some philosophers of the more profound kind, that when this kind of men die they are presently transported to a remarkable island, where there are many beautiful and toothsome things, but not enough to go round. In the general game of grab which is always going on, and on account of its disappointing results, they are said to develop quite astonishing hatreds.

Guy Ferrier learned at school to despise the whole of mankind except a few who need do nothing, but are born to enjoy; most of the boys in his own set who held those views went out into the world and shook off this narrow view; he went out into the world and retained it. He despised, for instance, the honest Scotch merchants because they bought, to sell again, cargoes of sugar; and he despised the Professor because he held a post by which he earned his living. He despised him so heartily, and found it so intolerable to be addressed by him on terms of equality, that he began to hate and despise his cousin for liking him. And his mind was so warped by prejudice, and so narrow, that he found it difficult afterwards to shake off the dislike. He therefore avoided the quarter-deck as much as possible, and spent his time chiefly with his venturous friend, from whom, in the course of his voyage, he won so large a sum that he could afford to send the Major a cheque for five hundred on account. But it is not every day that a man who is a player, but not a fine player, picks up another who is also a player and a more reckless player than himself.

He had one chance. He sat opposite to Virginie at breakfast, luncheon, and dinner, being naturally placed near the Captain, while the obscure Professor had to content himself with a seat at the chief officer's side. It was impossible for any young man to sit opposite to the girl every day for three hours or so—because in this line of steamers meals are considered the chief business of the day, and must not be hurried—without perceiving that she was an extremely attractive young lady. Yet his mind was not open to the sweet influences of love. A lover ought to be light-hearted, and he was heavy-hearted; a lover ought to look on the world cheerfully; Captain Ferrier regarded it gloomily, as a place where luck is generally against the player, and where people are wickedly impatient to be paid. So that the innocence and ignorance of the girl, her curiosity about the great world she was going to visit, her vague hopes and little fears, which to most men were charming, irritated him. If Maude wanted him to marry her, he thought sulkily, she might arrange the thing herself—at all events, any kind of marked attention before all these people was out of the question. He paid her no attention at all; he made no attempt to appear interesting or clever, or profound or remarkable in any way, as is frequently done by men who open the old-fashioned siege in the old-fashioned way, and try to begin by inspiring respect. Virginie thought her cousin a rather morose young man, who never laughed, and smiled only when politeness required the effort. He was, in fact, a morose young man. It is one of the pleasing results of a life devoted to the pursuit of 'pleasure,' that it makes a man, quite prematurely, incapable of mirth, merriment, or joy of heart. It is very odd, but it is so. Sometimes one thinks that those black brethren of Ceylon who never laugh must be one and all engaged in the pursuit of pleasure.

When the voyage was over, and Guy Ferrier met his sister, he was fain to confess that he had made no progress whatever.

She shook her head sadly.

'Things, Guy,' she said, 'can no longer be trifled with. There is absolutely no more money for you.'

'There must be some,' he replied. 'I must get a couple of thousand at least before long.'

'How long can you wait, Guy?'

'I do not know. Perhaps three months; perhaps four or five. I must have money, Maude.'

'Can you not borrow more? You have raised money before on your reversionary interests—can you raise no more?'

'No, not a penny more. They are mortgaged to the hilt.'

She sighed heavily.

'My poor father! If he only knew!' Then she thought of what her brother had done, the futility of helping him; the vain sacrifices she herself had made filled her with wrath which for the moment overcame her affection. 'Oh! Guy—Guy—what a shameful—what a wicked thing it is! All gone the same way, and no use to help, no use to advise.'

'If you have nothing but reproaches, Maude, I will go. I did think that from you I should meet with a little sympathy. But women are all alike.'

'Yes,' she said, bitterly, 'we are all alike: we sit at home and hope and pray, and the Prodigal goes on, and takes everything and throws it away. We are all alike, Guy: we sit and suffer, and can do nothing.'

He made no reply, because there was nothing to say. This thin and anxious woman of thirty had given him everything. He had taken all her own money and all she could get from her father; he had taken her jewels and sold them; he had taken her youth and beauty; he had promised, he had made countless promises, but he broke them all. It would have been better for her—far better—if at the very first mess she had left her brother to flounder out as best he might. Now she had done so much, she was bound to go on; she must stand by him and suffer to the end.

She had sunk into a chair, and sat with clasped hands, and eyes which had no tears in them. She could not cry for the indignation and bitterness in her heart.

'And my father knows nothing,' she said. 'He knows nothing. And some day he must be told, because I can help you no longer.'

'If he must know, he must, I suppose,' her brother replied, carelessly.

'There is your cousin, Guy: can you not even think of her?'

'I have thought about her, Maude. In fact, I think about her every day. Isn't it an infernal shame that a girl like that should have a hundred thousand pounds, and I should be hard up for a trifle of two thousand?'

'Is that all you think about?'

'Enough too; I should say.'

'What is she like?'

'I believe you would call her pretty. She's a fair girl; and her manners are good—at least I dare say they are. She doesn't do anything dreadful. But you had better call upon her. She thinks a great deal about the relationship, and you may be civil to her.'

'And won't you think about her, Guy, in the way I want? Think how it would set you up to marry her. You could buy back all your mortgages. You could start quite fair again. There would be no more debts and worries.'

'I tell you I do think about her.'

'Then why—oh! Guy—why——?'

'Because I do not want to marry any woman. Is that sufficient reason for you?'

'I shall do what I can for you, Guy. When your difficulties are so great that you can bear them no longer, you will, perhaps, take the step which will relieve you. *It is the only step, remember.* Meantime, I will do my best to prepare the way for you.'

He made no reply, but left her with moody and morose face.

These schemes, these difficulties, were concealed from the head of the house, Lord Ferrier, who, although he found his son difficult to get on with, and taking small interest in the things which interested himself, was yet perfectly satisfied as regards his manner of life. Let the young man do what he pleased up to a certain time: he had, himself, followed the traditions of the House in serving under the colours for a term, before becoming a simple country gentleman. Let his son do the same thing. As for himself, he loved the simple life of his country house. He was a farmer and a landlord before everything else. Things were tight with him, because many of his farms were unlet; but things would improve. There was no money, because it had all been laid out in unproductive improvements; and, at the best, Lord Ferrier was poor for a peer. A stately, tall man of sixty odd years, with a Presence, who had gone beautifully grey, which is much better than going bald. He was taller than his son; his head was larger; his figure was broader; his appearance more solid; and his eyes were better. The eyes are the first of human features to catch the expression which grows out of the life which men lead; then it goes to the mouth and lips; and, finally, it is stamped as a seal upon the forehead. The stamp upon the old Lord's forehead was what may be expected in that of a man who preserved those old-fashioned ideas about honour, duty, religion, loyalty, patriotism, property, rank, contentment, thrift, modesty, which formerly stood the old country in good stead, and seem now doomed to decay and disappearance ; a man who was proud of his name and descent, was kind of heart and considerate towards all men ; who was courtly in manner and sincere of speech ; a man who hated Radicals, Republicans, Communists, Socialists, Nihilists, Comtists, Atheists, and persons of 'advanced' views generally, as he hated the DEVIL. As for his estates, he was a tenant for life ; he held them on trust ; it was his duty to hand them on to his successor improved and enlarged. And, as every gentleman ought to have a hobby, it was Lord Ferrier's hobby that he could paint. He had painted steadily for forty years ; and during the whole of the time, according to his friends, his painting had grown steadily worse. Yet every year he sent a picture to the Royal Academy, which was promptly rejected ; and every year he made dozens of studies, landscapes, heads, cattle-pieces, and river-scenes—working as hard at his hobby as any professional man at the calling which gave him daily bread.

Maude called upon her cousin, and was gracious to her and to her guardian. The beauty and the grace of the girl, so soft, so delicate, so ethereal, surprised her. Was her brother a stone, that he should have been blind to this miracle of loveliness? Her manner was a little shy, because she was so inexperienced and so ignorant, but it was the manner of a lady. She invited her, with Mrs. Hallowes, to dinner alone, so that it would be a dinner *en famille*, she said.

To this first entertainment she did not invite her brother—for reasons. Lord Ferrier would interest the girl more. And, in fact, Virginie was greatly moved by the kind and affectionate reception which the venerated head of the house accorded her. He told her how he had been at school with her father, his first cousin, and what a good fellow he had always been, and how she resembled him in face, though her father was never—well—never half so charming; and he paid her so many compliments and showed her so much kindness that Virginie fell in love with him at once. The compliments and kindness of old men always please girls; if they are girls of the world they are pleased because men of such wide experience should show such admirable discrimination; if they are girls new to the world they are pleased because they are not afraid. The worst of young men's flattery is that one never knows what they may say next, and that they may at any moment go on to a proposal.

Maude began at once, so as to lose no time, to acquire that influence over her cousin's mind which

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would assist her in her designs. She must woo Virginie for her brother. She must make this girl in love with herself, with Lord Ferrier, with the house, with everything belonging to them, before she would try to make her fall in love with Guy. She called nearly every day; she sent frequent invitations; she drove with her; she made her father buy a horse for her, and then she rode with her; she managed so that if Virginie went anywhere, or saw anything, it should seem as if by her advice or help. She gave her wise counsel in matters of dress. She instructed her in the things which girls *must* know, or seem to know; and she took her in hand in the matters of art and music, of which Virginie was profoundly ignorant. In all Palmiste there is not such a thing as a picture; while as to music, they know little or nothing beyond the elementary tune. And always she pleased the girl, who was easily pleased, by a show of affection, sympathy, and interest, as if she had always longed to know her, and had studied carefully how she could be of use to her. At the same time, lest Mrs. Hallowes should be jealous, she treated her as if she was an old and valued friend, instead of a mere acquaintance.

Then Virginie, thus assisted, began to go into society.

From her point of view it was bewildering. All the people seemed to know everybody, and to be able to talk about everything. For herself, she knew nothing, and she knew nobody. She was not able, at first, to talk about anything. After a little, she began to understand something. Maude taught her the way in which pictures, and music, and books are talked about. But the things of real interest, the family histories, the personal gossip, she could not master. She was also greatly astonished, at first, because no one took the smallest interest in the events and politics of Palmiste Island. In her eyes, this place was the most important, in everybody's eyes, of all the British dominions, next to England itself. Small as it was, only a tiny speck in the ocean, it grew such a quantity of sugar, and had so romantic a history, that Australia, New Zealand, Canada, seemed of comparatively small importance. And she could not possibly understand how anybody could fail to be interested in its politics, its fertility, its beauty, or the differences in the social position of the inhabitants. Most astonishing thing of all, she actually once met a coloured man, a native of the island, at a dance, and the English girls were dancing with him! Happily, the man had not the presumption to ask her for a dance. Then she met a man who had been a Governor there, and nobody called him 'Your Excellency,' or paid him the slightest reverence or respect; and men talked slightingly of Colonial Bishops; and gentlemen who were honourable members of the Legislative Council were held as nought. These things were strange to her at first. Maude was worse than anybody. She refused to pretend any interest in Palmiste; she would talk of nothing but England, and, which Virginie liked, especially of the honour and glory of the Ferrier House. But daily she felt more and more how small a thing was her own sugar estate and simple bungalow compared with the splendid estates and noble houses of the people to whom she now belonged.

'Why should you trouble your head about the place?' Maude said. 'You will marry and settle in England, and your mother will then, I hope, come home and live with you. You have no other friends there, have you?'

'Oh! yes. I have many friends. There is my guardian, Captain Kemyss, to begin with; and Madame, and Tom.'

'Tom! Who is Tom?'

'Tom is Captain Kemyss's son, you know. He always told me he loved me.'

'That seems great presumption; but perhaps he only meant it in a brotherly sense.'

'Of course,' said Virginie. 'Tom was always a brother to me.'

Poor Tom!

'And then,' she continued, 'there was the Professor.'

‘What was he?’

‘He is in England now. He isn’t a Professor any more; and his name is Percival. He always said he loved me, too.’

‘They showed their good taste, my dear Virginie,’ said Maude, laughing. ‘But I think it was a great impudence to tell you of it. Perhaps they merely wanted to make you understand that they really had good taste. No doubt, however, they have already consoled themselves.’

When the first strangeness had gone off, when Virginie had become an established and constant visitor at the house, when her father became, by his own admiration of the girl, an unwitting accomplice in her schemes, Maude began, but cautiously, to talk about her brother. He seldom went into general society, she explained, because he was too fastidious for general society; the dreadful want of taste in conversation, dress, and manners irritated him; he did not, certainly, belong to the dancing set; it was not to be expected of him that he would go to balls for the sake of the supper, as many men do in this abominable town. Guy was, as no doubt Virginie had already discovered, a man of the most refined and fastidious taste; he was not a great talker, but his opinions were convictions; he never tried to show his own superiority, but when he was called upon, Maude said, the true ring of intellect was heard in his every utterance; what he said was always right; what he did was always noble. Maude drew the picture of the brother she ought to have had; the splendid result of generations of careful training; the perfect knight; the statesman of the future; the prop and support of the Conservative cause. Heavens! if men only understood how women love them to be great and strong! They know that we want them to be beautiful, and they do their best, all out of the kindness of their hearts, to meet our views. But we, selfish creatures that we are, waste and idle our lives away and do nothing, so that our sisters and wives are fain to be ashamed of us, and to apologise for us instead of being proud and happy because we are so brave, and so industrious. Lay it to heart, my brothers.

One thing astonished Maude; yet she seemed to understand it. Guy had never fallen in love with any woman. This was not because his nature was cold, for, she said, he was a man of the deepest and warmest feeling, but it arose from his refined taste and the dread which he naturally felt lest he should find something in his wife, when it was too late, to trouble and irritate him. 'Think, my dear Virginie,' she said, clasping her hands, 'if such a man, with nerves so highly strung, should have to live all his days with a person whose very appearance might irritate him hourly. My dear child, if he could only find a true wife somewhere; if he could only find a woman of your tender heart and sweet temper and sympathetic susceptibilities. But there,' she sighed, 'men never see what is lying before their very feet.'

'Sometimes I think,' she said, warming to her subject, 'that Guy is like a knight of romance. There was never any frivolity about him; he could never endure what some young men call fun. Heaven protect us from the funny man! He never wanted to laugh at foolish jokes and stories. My dear, did you ever see a whole theatre full of people laughing because a man has tumbled down and hurt himself? He never wanted to talk, even as a boy, to show his wisdom. You have observed, probably, his silent moods. It is by meditation that wisdom comes. When he is in a silent mood he loves to hear grave music. I was glad when he came in last night and sat down in a corner, not wanting to talk, that you were playing that sonata. Your playing, dear child, like your voice, soothes him. My own voice is too loud for him, and my playing is too—what shall I say?—too brilliant. I play as I was taught, and I suppose I think too much about execution.

'Guy was saying the other day'—this was during another of Maude's confidential conversations—'that beautiful women are made for beautiful rooms. Our own rooms, he said, never look properly furnished unless Virginie is in them. Was it not pretty of him, my dear?'

These and a thousand such sayings could not fail to produce an effect upon a girl so utterly inexperienced as Virginie. Mrs. Hallowes, who knew perfectly well what they meant, and who perfectly appreciated the value of her ward, fell in with the plot, because she honestly thought the match a highly advantageous one for the girl. She wrote to that effect indeed to Captain Kemyss. 'I hear nothing very much,' she said, 'against Captain Ferrier's reputation, except that he is a man of very few friends. His chief fault, in my eyes, is that if he intends to become Virginie's lover, he shows very little ardour. Indeed, he has not even begun to make love. But his sister assures me that his affections are very strongly engaged, and that he only hesitates because he thinks that the young lady should at least have time to look round her. This seems honourable, though not what one would expect of a young man, when so beautiful an heiress is in the case. Indeed, I should prefer a little anxiety lest so great a prize should be carried off by someone else. As regards our dear girl, she looks upon Maude as her greatest friend; she considers Maude's brother to be all that a fond sister has painted him. And though I do not suppose that she is at all what we used to call "in love," I do think that she waits but the word. When that is spoken, there will be no other man in the world for her but Captain Ferrier.

'You must not think that she forgets her Palmiste friends; on the contrary, she is always thinking of you all—and for you, and especially of her brother Tom. But she writes to you so often that I need not assure you any farther upon this point.'

'So she will marry her cousin after all,' said Captain Kemyss, laying down the letter with a sigh. 'I do not like him; but I may be wrong. After all, it is satisfactory to think that she will be Lady Ferrier. Her father would have liked it. And as for Tom—her "brother" Tom—as Mrs. Hallowes calls him—clever woman, that!—he must put up with his disappointment. What else could he expect? Perhaps, if things go wrong, he may remain as Virginie's manager. I would rather he had been her husband.'

So things were planned for Virginie. She was to marry her cousin. She had been brought over from Palmiste for that purpose; she had become engaged to him out there, people said: she had been romantically promised to him in infancy, others said. Nobody knew who started these reports, or what foundation of fact they possessed; but everybody believed them, and Maude herself, when she was asked if they were true, did not contradict the statement.

But what a shame, what an extraordinary shame, that so beautiful a girl should have been engaged even before she came out. The soft sweet languor of her manner was roused to animation only when she danced; her limpid eyes; the delicacy of her complexion; her graceful figure; her gentle kindliness to all alike, from peer to Treasury clerk, endeared her to English youth, and made Mrs. Hallowes, who 'ran' this heavenly creature, a Power for the time in the Social world. With an heiress one can always get into good houses; with such an heiress there is no telling to what heights Mrs. Hallowes might have raised herself, but for the events which interrupted her upward flight just when she was beginning to feel herself at her strongest and best. These events were connected intimately with the ride of this particular morning in June.

As these three rode in the Row, there were many who recognised them, and pointed them out to each other. Among these were some—gentlemen dressed with, perhaps, more regard to colour and picturesqueness of effect than is common in society—who seemed to know the Captain professionally, and informed each other that things were looking up with certain pieces of signed paper ; for the Hon'ble Captain Ferrier was going to marry a girl; no doubt the fair-haired girl riding alongside him, who had got, it was said, nothing short of a hundred, yes, a hundred thousand at her back. Then they passed by and others followed, and a good many of the men who rode that morning seemed to interest these gentlemen with big cigars and showy garments and diamond rings.

Now where the crowd was thickest, opposite Hyde Park-gate, where the chairs were ranged in a double row and were all filled, there stood a lady, still young, being not more than five or six-and-twenty, accompanied by an old gentleman, and surrounded by a small court of gentlemen. Other ladies as they passed turned their heads and looked at her with curiosity—that is a polite way of saying that they stared their very rudest and hardest at her. She was well dressed—extraordinarily well dressed—and was a most striking and handsome woman, with regular, strongly marked features, a strong mouth and chin, and rather a loud voice. Outside the little circle of her friends stood, or strolled, all looking at her, a noble army of martyrs—young men—who longed to make her acquaintance, but could not because they had no one who would introduce them. For this lady was no other than Violet Lovelace, the new light of the London stage, as clever and sparkling as any who had ever offered their beauty and their wit for the admiration of the public. And this little circle round her consisted of those who could boast of an acquaintance with her, in right of which they became her courtiers. And the old gentleman—he was manifestly old, though his wig was black and curly, because his lips trembled and his eyes were crowsfooted—was Paul Perigal, for many years attached to the Princess's Theatre. He was, in fact, in his seventy-fifth year, and he dressed carefully after the fashion of his thirty-fifth summer, which was when her gracious Majesty was still a youthful bride, and when the mode as regards collars, neckties, and hats differed in some important details from the present. Violet Lovelace retained her old friend and tutor in her house as her companion: he kept the house going, paid the bills, was her faithful steward, saw that the 'boy' was looked after when his mother was at rehearsal, and went with her wherever she went. Now as Violet was invited a good deal to supper and breakfast, and liked to accept as many invitations as possible, being a kind-hearted person, glad to bestow a little happiness wherever she could, the old man was more than her companion and friend—he was her chaperon; and nobody lived who could truthfully boast that Violet Lovelace had accepted an invitation alone.

While they were all talking, the lady half turned her head and looked at the riders. Then she stopped laughing suddenly.

'What is it, Violet?' asked one of her friends —everybody called her by her Christian name. 'You look as if you had seen a ghost.'

'I have, my Lord,' she replied. 'I have seen a ghost whom I hoped never to see again; and I feel as if buckets of cold water were being poured down my back. So I think I will go home. Come, Daddy!'

'The ghost I saw, Daddy,' she explained, when they were outside the Park, 'was the ghost of my husband. He did not see me. The sight of him made me long to—to say something I should not. A lady must not be violent, must she?'

Paul shook his head doubtfully.

'Violence,' he said, 'sometimes means fire. You ought to rise to the occasion. Give me a woman who can feel a situation and rip out the words as if she meant them. But such a woman is hard to find nowadays. When I was a young man——'

'I do feel the situation, Daddy. I assure you, I feel it very strongly. And I should like very much to rip out the words. But, somehow, I don't think the audience would have been pleased. We must always consider the stalls, you know. In your young days you only played for the pit.

Let us go home. The sunshine has turned into cloud for us, and the warm air is cold.'

'The "Return of the Husband,"' murmured Paul. 'Adapted from the French of "Le Mari Repenti." Principal parts by Miss Violet Lovelace and Mr. ——. I remember he said his name was Richard Johnson; but he looked like Mr. Plantagenet Howard.'

'Never mind his name, Daddy. That was his sister riding with him—the sallow-faced woman, with black hair and big eyes and a thin figure. She looked at me as she passed with the curious contempt which makes us actresses love the real lady so much. Bless her! I know all about her. My husband takes all her money from her to pay his debts. Tender, thoughtful brother he is! Daddy,'—she clasped the old man's arm with both her hands, though they were in the open, in gay and handsome Piccadilly, which has a thousand eyes—'Daddy, if I thought the boy was going to turn out like his father, I would—no—I would ask you to take him away and kill him.'

'He won't,' said Paul. 'With such a training as I have given him, and such an example as mine, he can't.'

'Who was the girl with him, I wonder? Not that I care. She seemed pretty.'

'If he repents, and comes home and asks forgiveness, I suppose you will take him on again.'

'Never, never! And he knows it. Marriage is always a lottery. Some men belong to the good lottery; most to the bad lottery. My husband, Daddy, is one of the very last and worst; he is, indeed, a most disgraceful lottery. But even he won't try on the repentant dodge. Don't talk about him any more, and let us buy something to take home to the boy.'

CHAPTER II.

ELSIE'S FRIEND.

'I THINK, Elsie,' said Mr. Percival, formerly called the Professor, 'that this is a chapter which will fire the imagination, and make the blood boil and the pulses quicken. Don't you find your generous young heart leaping up?'

He was reading from a manuscript, and a girl was sitting at the open window listening. The place was a first-floor in one of those streets of profound respectability—from the lodging-house point of view—about Bloomsbury. A box of mignonette was in the window, which assisted the imagination and helped the listener to follow the reader far away among woods and meadows, streams and hills. The girl was quite young, not more than eighteen or nineteen; she was listening critically, and she shook her head to express a kind of doubt. It was a head of a pretty shape, set off by the last fashion of wearing the hair, which reveals the shape of a head, and is therefore fatal to many a girl who might otherwise be counted beautiful. Her face belonged to a not uncommon type, whose beauty depends chiefly on expression; it is a good, safe kind of beauty, because when it once takes hold of a man, it grows upon him, and fastens upon him, until he cares for no other kind of face in the world.

Mr. Percival, no longer the Professor, for he had resigned, and was now engaged on making that spoon or spoiling that horn, lived in the house as lodger. He had lived there before he went abroad, so that he returned to it as an old friend. Elsie, the daughter of the house, was a school-girl when he went away, and a grown-up girl when he came back. There was only one other lodger, and he was an old gentleman who gave no trouble; and on the proceeds and profits derived from her two lodgers, Elsie's mother, who was a widow, paid her rent and taxes and supplemented the family income. All day long, until half-past seven, Elsie was the governess of a child of five or six; in the evening, resuming an old custom of her childhood, she became the companion and confidante of Mr. Percival, a pleasant, conversational, good-natured sort of man, who liked companionship, especially of the youthful female kind. Sometimes she went for walks with him in the quiet squares; or she sat with him, or she read with him, or even she went to the theatre with him, in a manner which would have been compromising to the last degree in some circles; but in Elsie's, which can hardly be called a circle, and yet was not a square—perhaps a crescent, an oblong—it didn't matter. She had no friends who would inquire what were Mr. Percival's intentions, and, indeed, at present he had none, because Elsie seemed to him still the child he remembered when he was last in London, and because he was without an income and was feeling his way along the thorny path of literature, dreaming and devising great things, and meanwhile thinking himself lucky when he had a book tossed to him for review, or got an article accepted, or hit upon an idea which could be afterwards worked up. As for falling in love with Elsie, that, if you please, no more entered into his mind than into hers. He was ten years older than herself, which at eighteen seems a frightful difference. She knew, besides, that he was already in love with a young lady as beautiful as a queen, whom he could never marry by reason of one Tom, who somehow stood in the way. This young lady was in England, having come across the seas in his company, but he did not go to see her, because, Elsie thought, he felt that it would be a pity for him to get more entangled in this hopeless labyrinth of love. Besides, a literary man wants to keep his brain clear, and in that novel he was writing, from which he read to her sometimes in the evening, there was a man so madly in love with a young lady whom both hero and novelist thought was perfect, yet who seemed to Elsie a whimsical woman, that merely to portray his emotions it was necessary for the mind of the writer to be quite free from any troubles of its own ; the largest and fullest sympathy was required for love of this passionate kind. When the work was completed it would be time to visit Virginie, whose Christian name Elsie had heard many hundreds of times.

She shook her head, criticising the chapter.

'I suppose it is a powerful scene,' she said ; 'but, you know, they wouldn't really go on like that. Nobody possibly could.'

'What would they do, then?'

'Oh! I don't know. They would feel angry and disappointed with each other. Then they would go away and break things off, I suppose.'

'It is clear to me, my child, that you have not the faintest conception of the passion of love. How should you?' he sighed. 'For my own part, I have experience. I portray, with a change of name, my own feelings towards Virginie.'

'Oh!' She laughed the laugh of the Doubter. 'Your passion, indeed! But you have grown desperate, and you—why you go on as happily as if you had no passion.'

'The sting is concealed,' he said. 'It is like the hair shirt. Many a lusty knight of old was found after death to have worn a hair shirt unknown to his friends.'

'Yes,' she said, sharply. 'They put on flannel first, I suppose. Why can't you draw things as they are and people as they talk? That is what I like to read about.'

'Profound student of human nature! Remember that it is the province of Art not so much to present Nature faithfully as to present things as they should happen—but don't. Nature is flat. Situations are wasted. In real life, my child, events do not happen dramatically; nor are the right things said at the right moment; nor are there surprises—though, to be sure, *il n'y a rien sur que l'imprévu*. Real life, Elsie, is apt to be dull——'

'Horribly dull,' said the philosopher of eighteen. 'Frightfully dull, sometimes.'

'Yes, and flat, and unhappy; being made unhappy chiefly by little things, not big calamities. Temper, I believe, and want of sympathy, and want of change, and want of society, make up most of the domestic unhappiness which no he novelist has had the courage to tackle. It is woman's work, not man's, to write about the little pin-prickings of the home life. Did you ever have prickly heat, Elsie? Of course you have not. Then you can't understand—but I can—what many of our beautiful English homes are like. Real life? No; I do not think I shall tackle the subject of real life. Romance is what I shall freeze to.'

'Want of change seems to me the worst thing of all,' said Elsie. 'Look at my poor father. He was born in London, he lived in London, and he never went out of London, because he never could afford it. Hampstead he called the country. It was his only idea of country, poor dear. It was mine, too, till you first came and we began to go about together.'

'Yes,' said the great writer, as yet unknown; 'we have made pilgrimages on Sundays, haven't we? We know the pit of the theatre, do we not? We have ventured on the river at Hampton, happy Hampton! we two together. Courage, Elsie, life must not be monotonous for you.'

'Then life ought to be honest,' said the girl passionately. 'Why, I am a common cheat and impostor.'

'Nay, nay,' said her adviser. 'If Miss Violet Lovelace is pleased with your manner and work, surely that is enough.'

'She advertised for a perfect lady for her boy, I answered the advertisement. She was very good to me, and said at the beginning such kind things about my manners, you know, that I did not dare to undeceive her. "My dear," she said, "I want a perfect lady, because my boy will be a gentleman. You may go on calling me Miss Violet Lovelace if you like, because that is my stage name; but I am a married woman, and my husband is a Wretch, although he is a gentleman of good family. I am separated from him. As for myself, I am not quite a lady—off the stage; but I am getting on, and when the boy grows up and can make comparisons, he shall not be ashamed of his mother. Of course, I have few opportunities of knowing real ladies in private life. So now you see what I want, and if you will try, and will be good and patient with the boy, I shall always be more grateful to you than words can tell." That was what she said; and I deceived her, and said I would try.'

'The word lady, Elsie,' said Mr. Percival, putting aside his manuscript, 'covers an area about equal in extent to that claimed for the word gentleman.'

'If I had told her that my father was nothing but a humble clerk in a small house of business, and that my mother took in lodgers, would she have received me as her governess? You know she wouldn't.'

'The question is, rather, if she knew these facts now would she consider you unfit for the post? Because you see, my child, she seems to like you.'

'I am sure she likes me. Nobody could be more affectionate to me, or kinder, which makes the deception worse.'

'Very good then, and you like the boy.'

'Who could help liking the dear child?'

'In that case, Elsie, trouble not your little head about possibilities. For there are many. Enjoy the good fortune that comes in your way. Sunshine is scarce. Kind persons are scarce. If Miss Violet Lovelace asks you any questions about yourself, tell her what you please. Meanwhile, be as useful as you can to the boy. Now, my child, I am going to put away the Novel. I say, though,' he added, lovingly regarding his manuscript, 'the last is really a most tremendous chapter. I wonder how Thackeray would have treated it. But, poor man, he never could have conceived a situation so dramatic and so terrible; and I am going to have a quiet pipe. You need not go unless you like. In fact, I would rather you stayed.'

She did stay. Nothing could have been a greater reversal of the manners and customs of the perfect lady, whom Elsie was supposed to present for the ensample of the boy, than for a girl of eighteen to be sitting night after night with a young man of eight-and-twenty—alone, if you please. Yet Elsie liked it. And the young man liked it. And Elsie's mother thought no harm of it, and if she did she was welcome to walk upstairs and put her head in and speak her mind.

'Miss Violet,' said Elsie, 'came home to-day at half-past twelve in a very low way. First, she sat down and sighed as if her heart was breaking.

Then she wished she had never been born. After that she kissed the boy, and said that if it was not for him she could wish that she was dead. When they served our dinner, which is her breakfast, you know, because she has to sit up half the night sometimes and gets up late, she would not eat anything.'

'Got a cold?' asked Percival.

'Oh! no. She never catches cold, though the theatre is full of draughts. She got up presently and went away to her own room. Then Mr. Perigal, who had been sighing with her, like a pump, whispered to me that she had seen her husband in the Park.'

'This grows mysterious. Is her husband generally invisible?'

'Mr. Perigal told me all about her marriage. She married a gentleman who was in love with her because she was so beautiful and so clever. Mr. Perigal was at the wedding, with her father, who is a stage carpenter at Drury Lane. Mr. Perigal believes that he was married under a false name. Anyhow, she won't say who or what the man is. But he must be a very bad man, because she left him and came back to Mr. Perigal, and said that nothing would ever induce her to go back to her husband, or to take any kind of help from him. And to-day she saw him riding in the Park, and it gave her a turn.'

'Ah! Things might be made of this,' said the aspiring novelist.

'Fortunately,' Elsie went on, 'it seems that he did not see her.'

'The Park would be a fine stage for a recognition scene. "It is—it is"—amid the tears of a sympathetic crowd—"it is my long-lost husband! Behold that scar, inflicted, in our happy, happy days, by your own hand, and with the kitchen poker! At last you find me"——'

'You forget,' said the young lady without an imagination, 'that he must know where she is and all about her, because her photograph is in all the windows.'

'To be sure. I forgot that. It must be a pleasing thing for a separated married man to be reminded of his bonds by every shop-window. I should walk in the Park—which, it seems, the gentleman was actually doing—so as to get out of the way of the photographs. I suppose Mr. Perigal does not know the cause of the separation?'

'No. She has never told anybody. No one knows her name, or anything about the marriage at all. Her husband, whoever he is, has never sent her any money or help; and at first, before she made a success, I think she was very poor at times. It seems cruel, when she is so beautiful, and so clever, and so much admired, and might marry well if she were free.'

'Yes, it seems cruel. Still, she has the boy.'

'Yes. The boy is to be sent to a public school, she says, because his father was there. And he is to go to Oxford afterwards, if he wishes. And then he is to go into the Army. So that we suppose his father was in the Army, too. As for the stage, it is not to be mentioned in his presence. And yet the child is a born actor, like his mother. But you don't care for this talk. Miss Violet Lovelace is nothing to you.'

'On the contrary, Miss Violet Lovelace is a good deal to everybody who goes to the theatre, if it is only to the pit. You and I have often admired her extremely.'

'You would laugh to see the love-letters and the bouquets she gets. Sometimes she shows them to me; sometimes she tosses them to Mr. Perigal, who puts them in the fire; and sometimes she gets angry with them, and tears them up in a rage. Now your pipe is finished, and perhaps you would like me to go. But if you like to have another, we can talk about Miss Virginie.'

'Woman is a wheedler. You know I should like to have another pipe, and you know I like to talk about Virginie.'

'She lives, does she not, in an enchanted island?'

'Yes; enchanted when she is on it. Formerly it was one of the Fortunate Islands. The shades of heroes used to haunt its woods and sit beside its waterfalls. I saw Ulysses there myself, once; but when I drew nearer, intending to have a talk over a few little things, he changed into an aged nigger with snow-white wool. But there is no doubt that the island was enchanted while Virginie lived there. Now that she has come to England the spell, I dare say, is removed. It cannot be anything more than a commonplace bit of an island, with ups and downs—which they call hills and ravines—and trees and rivers, and it smells all over of guano. I wonder anyone can go on living there. But no doubt they are all packing up to go away as fast as they can.'

'And what sort of a Palace did she have?'

'The Palace was built entirely of jasper, malachite, white marble, and other precious materials, set with sapphires and pearls. It was crowded with works of art, especially in sculpture, and it was hung with rich tapestries and silken curtains; beautiful flowers stood about, and there were perfumed fountains, and always the sound of dropping music, and wonderful maidens, with lustrous eyes and long floating hair, dressed in amber silk of Greek fashion, to attend the Princess.'

'How delightful! She was the Queen of the whole island, of course.'

'Why, of course she was. Nothing else was possible. She ruled all hearts, and was, indeed, a most gracious monarch, the fountain of honour, and the dispenser of joy.'

'And you were in love with her.'

'That was not unusual; in fact, we were all in love with her. But Tom came first. I only came second.'

'That horrid Tom!'

'Yes; I often regret that I never pushed Tom over the edge of the ravine. It might have been done so very easily, and the consequences to me would have been so delightful. Indeed, I was only restrained from doing so by the consideration that perhaps Virginie might have been annoyed, and one would not vex that divine creature even by a crumpled rose-leaf, to say nothing of a crumpled Tom.'

'I see. Did she like being loved by everybody? Did it make her vain?'

'Vain? Are you aware that you are speaking of Virginie? Do you know that she is without any fault at all? My dear Elsie, you must not ask questions which betray ignorance so profound.'

The girl laughed—

'Oh! it is delicious. And all about a woman!'

'Why—who should it be about, if not a woman?'

'To think that men can talk such extravagant nonsense, and, I suppose, believe it about any girls!'

'She is a goddess,' said Percival. 'Now, if there were no goddesses we should have to invent some. Do you see? Which things are an allegory.'

'No, I do not see. Cannot you be content with your Virginie as she is?'

'"As she is,"' he replied; 'there is no "*is*." You are to me—what I think you are. You are to yourself—what you think you are. To your mother you are someone else. Virginie is to me—a goddess. What she is to other men doesn't matter.'

'I like it,' said Elsie reflecting; 'only it must make a girl ashamed of herself to be called a goddess, when she knows very well that she is just like other people, and, I suppose, the best of girls sometimes feel that they ought to be better. Good-night, Mr. Percival. Go to bed and dream of your Enchanted Palace.'

'Now, there is a girl,' said Percival, slowly, as he prepared for going to bed, 'who might make a man, in time, believe that there may be, after all, different kinds and degrees in goddess-ships. May be? There are—yet—oh! Virginie!'

CHAPTER III.

AN ACTRESS AT HOME.

Nobody wanted a Miss or a Mistress to place before that illustrious name of Violet Lovelace; other people crave for titles; the more naked his name the better pleased is the actor; he knows, you see, the difference between real and sham distinction. The young lady arrived at the highest honours of her profession by a single leap. When she began, when Guy Ferrier discovered her, she was only intrusted with those parts which require little speaking, but a good deal of standing about on the stage. In one sense, therefore, she was, from the beginning, one of the brightest ornaments of the British Theatre, and, as one of a group, she helped to form many most delightful pictures.

At the outset, she was quite an ignorant young lady, without very much ambition, and only half conscious of her good looks. If you are born in the neighbourhood of Drury Lane; if your papa is a 'carpenter,' using the word in its theatrical sense; if all your friends belong, somehow or other, to the 'House,' so that the children go on with the Pantomime as soon as they can wear a costume, and the grown-up ones are supers, unless they are ticket-takers, carpenters, door-keepers, dressers, and the rest of it; if the pavement of Russell-court, Duke's-court, and Vinegar-yard is your dancing-school; if your mother is a dresser at the theatre, and your cousins are ballet-girls, and your brothers also drop naturally into the service, you are also pretty certain to fall in with the stream, and regard the theatre in some form or other as offering you the only means of getting your daily bread.

It was Mr. Paul Perigal—'old' Paul Perigal; his earliest recollections of the stage are connected with the visit of the allied Sovereigns—who first found out Emily Hicks. Purely in the interest of the drama he kept an eye upon beauty or promise among the humbler children of Thespis. Emily lived close to the theatre. She went on at Christmas till she grew too big to go on any longer. Her mother proposed that she should follow her own line, which is safe, if not lucrative, and become a dresser. But Paul Perigal ordered otherwise. 'Hicks,' he said to the carpenter, 'you've got a girl who may be a flyer. I've observed her, Hicks. She will be, unless my experience deceives me, a beautiful woman. Your own experience of the stage, Hicks, will warrant you in agreeing with me that beauty is half the battle, because a girl can always be taught to stand and turn her eyes about and smile, even if she can't open her mouth to speak. But your girl is as sharp as a needle and as cheeky as a boy. Send her to me, Hicks, and I will do what I can for her.'

Emily Hicks was not slow to recognise the fact that it is ten times more jolly to be dressed and to stand on the stage for the admiration of the world than to be hidden away behind for the purpose of dressing others. She also knew that she was frightfully ignorant of manners as well as of learning. And when she saw—which was every night—the stage ladies with their magnificent stage manners, she wondered whether she, too, would ever have to walk with that air, to sweep back the skirts with gestures so splendid, to wear such frocks as if they belonged naturally to her. Now, in the eyes of such observers as Miss Emily Hicks, it is most true that 'manners maketh the woman.'

Paul Perigal took great pains with her. She was such a sharp, intelligent pupil that he began to conceive the greatest hopes of her. She had a voice of the kind which is good for a song on occasion, though not enough to make her a singer. He had the voice trained; then he had her taught to dance—perhaps she would become a burlesque actress; then he taught her to walk and to carry herself; then he taught her to read aloud, to speak without the use of Drury-lane colloquialisms; then he persuaded her father to let her live with him entirely, with the view of separating her from those young friends whose acquaintance in after life might not be desirable. And when all was done, and the sharp-faced, cheeky child of Duke's Court had become in two or three years transformed into an extremely beautiful girl of seventeen, thus trained and drilled, the worthy old actor began to instruct her in the real craft and mystery of the dramatic art.

From such small beginnings sprang the greatness of Violet Lovelace.

She was on the stage in that small way already described for a few months only. Then she left it to marry a man who was madly in love with her: a young man, a handsome man, a man in the army, a man like a hero of romance for dark eyes and dark hair, a man—oh!—who was going some day to have a title. The last fact was her own secret, never revealed to her father or to Paul Perigal.

Paul heard of the intended marriage with a groan of disappointment. He hoped for so much from this girl, who was so clever. Now she was going to marry a swell, and his labour of four years would be lost. Never, never again could he hope to find a pupil so promising. His professional reputation was staked upon her success. He allowed her, he told everybody, to go on in small parts only in order to give her confidence; but wait—wait a bit—she would make the finest Lady Teazle ever seen on the stage; as Rosamond she would make an epoch; as Juliet she would be incomparable. He boasted about her at Rockley's: 'A gem of the first water, gentlemen; the very first water. I shall be content, for my own part, with the immortality which will be my lot, not as an actor, though, perhaps, memories may survive—I say nothing, but a certain Mercutio of the year 1836 is quoted still—thank you, gentlemen—but I shall not be remembered so much as an actor, but as the happy finder, developer, and instructor of this light in Histrionic Art.' And now this gem was lost, wrested from him, and to be lost to the drama. Pity! pity! a thousand pities!

What, however, Paul Perigal did not foresee, and could not possibly foresee, was the return of the deserter (who looked pale and worn, but resolute), which took place within a year of her marriage, and her announcement that she was ready to take up her old work, and to devote herself with it. She further informed her tutor that no questions were to be asked about her husband, who was a Wretch worthy of the greater condemnation. Then she asked Paul what he thought of the baby, who was wonderful for six weeks old; and then she said that she was ready to begin at once.

'I don't wish to put impertinent questions, my dear,' said Paul, tearfully, because the divided emotions of joy at her return to Art, and of sympathy with her wrecked married life, brought those signs of sympathy to his good old eyes. 'But I should like to ask one, if I might.'

'Can't tell, Daddy,' she replied, in something of her old defiant way. But she looked as if, at touch or word, she, too, might 'go off.' 'Can't tell till I hear it.'

'Only this, my dear,' he said. 'I did my best to make you a lady.'

'You did—bless your dear old heart!'

'But, you know, my experience extended to ladies on the stage, and—and—in point of fact—not those who have played leading parts. I don't think, for instance, that I ever saw a Juliet of the Lane at her own house. And as for Society ladies—ladies in the front—of course I never knew any. Oh! I know it's getting different with the young fellows now. But I'm old, and I understand my position, which is more on the level of the Nurse or Lady Capulet than with

Juliet. So that, you see, I've been at times fearful lest, when you went into marble halls and gilded saloons, people might have wondered who you were. Because your manners might not, perhaps, be quite the same as theirs. Don't think me rude, my dear.'

'Don't be afraid, Daddy. I never had any opportunity of showing any manners. Because I have never seen a lady, or a gentleman either, since I went away. Amy Robsart, bless you, was nothing to it. And I believe if my lord and master had been able to make that little trap in the staircase without being found out he would have done it, and I should have gone into it—flop: and there would have been an end of one. Of course I only waited till the boy was born to come away. And, of course, he didn't want the boy at all. I've been locked up since the wedding because he's ashamed of his wife, and he wishes she was dead.

'Never mind asking any more questions, Daddy. I mean to live, not to die; and the boy shall live too. And now that is settled let me get to work. No more standing with one knee bent and a sweet smile—like that—if you please. I must have a country engagement for leading parts; and then I must come to town. Go to Rockley's, and tell them I've come back. You may gas as much as you like about talent and beauty and such. I'll have my photograph taken again—you don't think I'm going off, do you?—and with your help, you dear old Daddy, we'll pull 'em in and make some money.'

She went into a country troupe and travelled for three years and more, patient, working hard, studying every morning with Paul, and never neglecting the boy.

Then she came to town and made her first appearance in a new comedy, which would certainly have been a failure but for her acting and her extraordinary beauty. The unforced merriment, the pathos, the ease of the new actress startled and arrested the people. It was a great success, and Violet's fortune was made.

The first thing she did was to advertise for a real lady to take daily care of her boy, now five years old and no longer a baby.

Elsie was the real lady. Violet chose her from a good many applicants on account of her quiet manner and trustworthy face.

'Some of them were dressed better,' she explained, 'and some of them pretended to know more, and some of them wanted to teach the boy on a system. Most of them looked as if they would probably beat and pinch the boy when I was out of sight. In that case I should have had to beat them, which they would not like, and there would have been rows. But this girl I am sure won't beat him. I told her I wanted a lady, and she blushed very prettily—Daddy, if only one could blush on the stage!—because, I suppose, nobody had ever doubted that she was a lady; not a stalls lady, or a private-box lady, but an upper-circle-at-four-shillings-reserved lady, who comes to the theatre by Underground, and is not ashamed to cry and laugh; father something respectable, I suppose, with a shop somewhere—what does it matter? She said that she would do her best for the child if I would let her take him; and she spoke so prettily—don't you think I might find a part for this style of thing? Look, Daddy'—here she drooped her eyes a little, made her face a little longer, just smoothed her hair, folded her hands and lowered her voice, and became immediately Elsie. 'That kind of thing. I believe it would take, if the people got to understand it at once. But I want an author—oh! I want an author badly.'

'But about the governess?'

'Oh! yes—well—you know she is quite young, and I am four-and-twenty, and I feel ever so old.' Violet was given to mix up things so that it is not always easy to follow her line of thought. What she meant, however, was that she was old enough to read character and to enact the part of a patron. 'So I just kissed her and told her to come every day, and that I was going to be a real lady sometime—in fact, that I am always understudying the part; but that at present I was a great stage lady, and so on, and so on. And here we are, and here she is, Daddy—and I feel that so respectable a young lady confers dignity upon the house. You are not to bring any more people from Rockley's here, if you please; the place will have to be as demure as the Foundling Hospital, and if you and I do sometimes have a little supper with a few noble patrons of the drama, we must have it out of the house in future.'

'Very well, Violet,' said Paul. 'Do you think the young lady, at odd moments, would like a little instruction in the——'

'You dear old man!' She threw her arms round his neck and gave him a stage kiss, which everybody knows is done without impressing the lips upon the cheek or brow at all. But she disarranged his wig. 'I believe you would like the whole world to go on the stage.'

'All the world's——'

'Don't, Paul. And let Elsie alone—she is to be my governess, not my rival. I should like,' said the actress, proudly, 'to see the woman who will be my rival, in a year or two. And now, Daddy, one more trial of that scene. Come! But I *must* find an author.'

It was this assumption of the 'real lady' which preyed upon poor Elsie's mind. Not that it entered Violet's busy head to ask who or what her father was. She was profoundly ignorant of the world outside the stage. Whether she was told that Elsie was the daughter of a Bishop or of a City clerk, she would not have suspected any difference. One sometimes gets glimpses of this ignorance of humanity's cherished social differences. Everything depends on rank, even in the most Radical and Republican countries; and rank is a thing of so much delicacy, so many shades, that only one born in the middle of it all can truly understand it—can at once feel the true awe for those above him, and the true contempt for those below. This is an advantage possessed by the middle-class man, which has never before been set forth. Violet, you see, was born too low down. In her early days, everybody with a black coat seemed to her a swell, and everybody in kid gloves seemed a lady. This kind of ignorance sticks in a surprising manner, so that you may detect the high-born aristocrat, however he may dissemble, by his not understanding why the solicitor and the general practitioner do not always stand upon the same level, and why the ladies of both decline to call upon the eminent draper's wife.

After a separation of five years the sight of her husband was to Violet the revival of old bitternesses that she had thought forgotten and clean passed away for ever. But you cannot so put things away and lock them up. Nothing is ever really forgotten so that you are quite safe that it will never come back to you. The sight of the man's face brought back to her recollection her foolish belief in him, her trust in his loyalty, her dreadful disappointment in him, the cruel things he had said, his selfishness, his shame of her, so that he kept her a prisoner and would neither let her go anywhere nor bring any of his friends to see her. No one should know, he told her, that he had been such a fool. No one should even guess that he had a wife. When she left him it was with a letter telling him where she was going and what she was going to do. They were to be henceforth as if they had never met; but, for the sake of the boy, she would preserve her marriage lines.

'Daddy,' she asked, 'could that man take away the boy?'

'I don't think he could.'

'If he were to try,' she said, with a glitter in her eye, 'I would stab him. Did you see him, yesterday; how he looked in the face of the girl he was riding with? That way he used to look at me. Sorrow, and trouble, for any woman who falls in the way of such a man.'

'There are laws about married people,' Paul went on; 'but I don't know exactly what they are, because I never, somehow, thought about marrying till it was too late. Much better, for an old man like me, to have a young daughter than a young wife about him. No wife could be so pretty, and bright, and clever, as you—and always in good temper——'

'Not always, Daddy; not when she meets her Wretch of a husband.'

'If I had a wife she would only be disturbing my ease. Well, my dear, I don't know what the laws are. But I believe that whatever you earn, he can take, unless there's been some sort of a legal separation. All that you have is his, you see; and I suppose that all he has is yours, too.'

'I don't think,' said Violet, laughing rather grimly, 'that he is likely to go to the treasury on Saturday morning; and he won't want the furniture. Besides, that is yours.'

'We will say so to keep it from him. But it was bought with your money.'

In fact, Violet had displaced all the dingy old sticks and refurnished the house with bright new things of the most modern fashion; so that the place, though Bloomsbury is not one of the most cheerful and sunny parts of London, was pleasant to look upon.

'It is the boy, Daddy, that I am thinking of. Always the boy. I am sure he hates the boy;

he would do the boy a mischief if he could. Because, you see, the boy is his heir.'

'If he hates the boy, he can leave his money to someone else.'

'It isn't only money, Daddy. It is land, and . . . and other things that he can't leave.'

'He shall only harm the boy,' said Paul, fiercely, 'by passing over my mangled corpse.'

'Thank you, Daddy, dear. I know your fidelity, and I will bring you home a property sabre, one of the sort with a curly blade, you know. But that won't be the way. Oh! Daddy, I am going to have trouble. He will come to see me.'

'Courage, Violet. He can do nothing.'

'And I can do a great deal. Because he is afraid of me. Patience—patience—Daddy mine.'

CHAPTER IV.

THE ONLY WAY OUT OF IT.

On that night Virginie dined with her cousins. No one was at the dinner except Mrs. Hallowes and Guy, who was for once in a good temper, and actually did something towards promoting the cheerfulness of the evening. For this small mercy Maude was grateful. The reason why he was in a good temper was that he had only that very morning hit upon an idea which seemed to him not only the most excellent way out of his perplexities, but also the only way out. Because he was now perfectly assured that unless he married an heiress there was nothing more that he could do to avert the crash. And because that idea seemed good in his own ideas, he saw a hundred reasons why it would seem good in the eyes of the other person chiefly concerned with it.

The idea was the following:—

On arriving in London he realised, principally through the photograph shops, the truth of his wife's statement that she, the woman whom he regarded with so lively a detestation, had become, almost at one step, one of the most popular actresses of the day. For her face greeted him with smiling eyes from every bookseller's shop, from every photographer's, and from every stationer's. Violet Lovelace was before him everywhere. He could buy her picture showing full face, three-quarter face, side face; he could buy her looking into a glass, tying a hood round her head, gazing heavenwards, in riding habit, in her favourite character, seated, standing, kneeling. After the first shock he cared very little about it, and ceased to be irritated by the sight of a woman he would fain have forgotten. She had succeeded. Very well; let her succeed, so long as she kept her secret. It was not until that very morning that he began to think how this very success, instead of being a danger to him, might actually be of the greatest use. It wanted only a little—a little . . . well . . . a little absence of scruple; and if he found, for his own part, that he could contribute, so to speak, this absence of scruple, why was it to be supposed that she, on the other side, who had as much to gain, would show herself troubled with qualms of conscience? For the plan which he had formed in his own mind was nothing but this—why not agree with the actress to break off suddenly, and say no more about the bond which tied them together? All they had to do was to go on as if nothing had ever happened at all. Such simplicity in the idea! Such a swift and sudden cutting of a Gordian Knot!

He considered the subject dispassionately, as he thought. That is to say, he lay back in his chair, and followed in imagination the various advantages of the plan.

She was still young; she was—well, perhaps, she still thought herself beautiful; how could he have ever been charmed by the beauty of which men raved? She was clever, they said; certainly in the old times her tongue was free and her temper sharp; she had always a little court of admirers about her; half the men in London were languishing for her; a great crowd gathered round the stage-door every night to see her drive away; Princes went to her theatre and applauded; the men at his club talked about her; she was inaccessible; she was guarded by old Paul Perigal, whom she called Daddy; she lived a quiet and blameless life. Why, such a woman, said Guy, has excellent chances: she may marry anybody—really, anybody; she has only to be careful of her reputation. Would it not be best—say as a calm, cold matter of business—to agree together that this business, a most awful nuisance to both of them, should be terminated? It wanted nothing but common consent, and silence afterwards.

Best? Why, it was the only thing to be done—the only possible thing. To go on as they were all their lives: thus to be tied and yet to be kept apart: could anything be more foolish? If it was a good thing for himself it was surely a far better thing for her: so good a thing was it for her that he hesitated whether he should do the woman so kind a turn. Certainly, he thought, taking the mental attitude such a man always assumes, she had behaved infernally badly to himself, and deserved nothing at his hands. Yet, considering how greatly his own interests were concerned in the matter, he would go and see her, and make her, by word of mouth, a definite offer of release. How happy she would be to have her freedom! How cleverly she had played her cards so that, with Daddy always at her side, her reputation was blameless! Yes; he would let her marry when and where she pleased. Benevolent young man! Most unselfish of young men! And then, when she was out of the way, he could marry his cousin—and her *dot*. At the mere thought of that pile of money his fancy lightly turned to green meadows, green pastures, green lawns, as large as tables, with shepherds sitting around, and the click of coin and the voice of him who held the bank, and the fierce joy of him who won and the breathless expectations of him who waited the event.

Lord Ferrier sat with Mrs. Hallowes on his right: she told him stories and amused him; and with Virginie on his left. It pleased him, though he hardly knew why, to know that this beautiful creature regarded him with so much respect: he liked her to ask him questions, to venture timidly on showing a return of the affection which he bestowed upon her; he referred things to her, asked her opinions, proposed plans for her, and gave her presents. He courted her, as Maude courted her, but unconsciously, for his son. It was for his sake, not for his own, that Virginie would accept the offer of her cousin.

Nothing would have been more pleasant than this little dinner *en famille*. To Virginie its chief charm was the beauty and fitness of its setting. Mrs. Hallowes had everything, without doubt, as it ought to be. Her furniture was of the most modern fashion; her decorations of the most approved type; the house was spacious and new; but her rooms lacked something. You cannot make old things; you cannot add the charm which lies in old furniture, old pictures, old bric-à-brac, all belonging to each other. Mrs. Hallowes had large rooms, and spacious; and these were small. The things in her house were good, but they were new. Here the plate was old, the furniture was old, the pictures were old; there was an old-fashioned air about the whole, far more pleasing than anything of the newest fashion. And at his end of the table sat the chief, old himself, yet in the most beautiful and picturesque time of man's life—the time of autumn, the age of stateliness and dignity, not of decrepitude. Maude herself, with her thin, pale cheeks and lustrous eyes, her dress of black velvet, with a diamond cross, looked in her place as doing duty for the Châtellaine. A quiet, easy dinner, in which everyone felt that in a home dinner conversation need not be forced. Maude saw her brother looking at the girl she wanted him to marry with eyes that seemed full of admiration. At last, she thought, even his cold heart was moved. He was moved—a little—as much as his anxieties allowed him to be moved—as much as any woman could then have moved him. The prospect of release removed a load of those anxieties. The thought that his sister expected him to propose to the girl immediately, and the satisfaction of considering that he might really be free and able to take that step, made him regard her more curiously. Yes, she was certainly a very pretty girl, and of a type not common in these realms. As Maude watched him she thought, but only for a moment—because it was but a wild hope, a hopeless hope—that perhaps his affections might be fixed, and the attractions of the green table be forgotten. But she was too sensible to dwell upon this unhappiness. She knew, from long and patient study of her brother, that his case was really as hopeless as the case of an habitual drunkard. He would have his vicissitudes. With money to spare, he might run on for years; but, in the long run, the end was certain. All that could be lost would be lost. Yet, with this absolute certainty of knowledge, she would not hesitate for a moment to sacrifice the innocent and truthful girl who believed all she was told, and suspected no motive. If the evil time must come, let it be put off as long as possible; perhaps it might not come till he who would feel it most would know it and feel it more.

'Guy,' said Lord Ferrier, when they were alone, 'your cousin is a very charming girl.'

'Yes, sir, she is very charming.'

'And very beautiful.'

'She is very beautiful.'

'Is she . . . has she any entanglement?'

'I believe, sir, she has none.'

Lord Ferrier looked about him, and stroked his chin reflectively.

'Then, Guy,' he said, 'we will go upstairs.'

The three ladies were sitting together. Mrs. Hallowes presently rose and began talking to Lord Ferrier. Maude went to the piano and began to play something. Guy sat down beside Virginie. Perhaps it was the soft atmosphere of the room; perhaps the wine he had been drinking; perhaps the sense of freedom gained by his newly-conceived idea; perhaps the words of his father—which made his heart feel an unwonted glow as he looked upon the girl whose fortune would make all things right for him.

'You are looking, Mrs. Hallowes,' said his Lordship, 'at one of my pictures'—it represented a girl in a field; and Mrs. Hallowes was wondering, before she burst into admiration, whether it was meant for a gipsy, or perhaps an Indian woman, or a Nymph, or a brown fairy. 'My daughter when at the age of fifteen. Thank you, yes; it is admitted to be a speaking likeness. Yet the Academy refused it. You see,' he added, with a smile, 'they will not allow a man who has a title to paint. We must not touch things professional.'

'Is it possible?' cried Mrs. Hallowes, who knew almost as much about Art as poor Virginie. 'Is it possible? The most delicately-painted, the most striking likeness.'

Virginie was sitting in an easy chair, beside a lamp covered with a soft, warm shade, whose colour was reflected on her cheek; other lamps with soft shades were standing about the room, so that it glowed with a soft subdued light: she held a fan in her hand: her eyes were soft and dreamy: she was listening to the soft and dreamy music.

Maude went on playing, and watched with keen and anxious eyes. So far all was well: her brother, for the first time in her experience, seemed attracted: she played more softly—more dreamily: in the old, old days, when he was a lad fresh from Eton, and still open to sweet influences, this dreamy music would make him sit listening as long as she chose to play. The thoughts of a boy are long, long thoughts; and now he was a man, with hardened heart, and the old innocence was gone: but yet the music touched him.

Yet not as it had done formerly, when it roused his mind for a moment to noble ambitions. Now it fell upon his soul as some potent drug mounts to the brain, and makes a man see things which exist not and believe things impossible to be real. His freedom was already achieved—somehow: he was actually free—in imagination. The 'other one' had actually accepted her discharge—in his imagination.

He was able to do—under these happy circumstances—what his sister wanted him to do. He would make her happy: he would make his cousin happy: he would make his father happy. Everybody should be happy, till the money was all gone. He put the thing to himself in this lively benevolent way, as if it was a duty closely connected with the fifth commandment.

'Virginie,' he whispered.

She blushed. It was the first time that her cousin had addressed her by her Christian name.

'Virginie,' he repeated, gently. I have said that he had a low, rich voice.

Maude heard. She saw her brother's bending head and her cousin's blushing cheeks; and she went on playing more softly, more dreamily, as if her very soul were wrapped and lapped in the melody.

'May I see you alone?' he asked. 'Virginie, my happiness is at stake.'

His own happiness, of course. After all, you can't ask a girl to marry you on the ground that it will make her happy. Less selfish men than Guy approach this delicate subject in the same manner.

'My happiness is at stake,' he repeated, feeling quite sure that the magnitude of the interests involved would not fail of moving any woman's heart.

She made no reply. Maude, watching, saw how her colour came and went.

Then Lord Ferrier stepped to her, and interrupted the conversation.

'Will you sing to me, my dear?' he said. 'Will you sing me one of your little French songs?'

'If that will give you any pleasure, my Lord.'

'All that you do, fair cousin, gives me pleasure. You are born under a happy star, to give nothing but pleasure to all who love you, my dear.'

She smiled, and sang her song. Guy stood by her. When she finished, he whispered again, 'Let me see you alone. Let me call upon you to-morrow. You will see me alone?'

'I will try,' she said, blushing.

Mrs. Hallowes had other engagements for the evening; but when they came away, Virginie requested to be set down at home. She had a headache; she wanted to be alone.

'My dear,' said her guardian, 'Captain Ferrier asked me to-night to allow him to see you to-morrow alone. I told him that I could not possibly make any objection. But your decision is in your own hands, Virginie. Shall I say anything for it—or against it?'

'Oh! no—no!' she replied; 'only . . . it seems so sudden . . . and what will Captain Kemyss say? and my mother? and Tom?'

'If Tom is a good brother,' said Mrs. Hallowes, 'he will be rejoiced. Captain Kemyss is a sensible man. Of course he will be rejoiced. And as for your mother, why, my dear, can it be possible that she would not rejoice at your marriage with the heir, who will some day be the head of the House, the future Lord Ferrier? Ask your heart, my dear, and leave the rest to me.'

'I ask my heart in vain,' said the girl, half laughing, half sighing; 'for I get no reply.'

'You do not dislike him?'

'Oh! no—no. How can I dislike a man so good and noble as Guy?'

Mrs. Hallowes said nothing for a while. She was, in fact, lost in natural admiration of Maude's great cleverness, because she had, for her own part, looked in vain for the least sign of this great nobility; Maude had filled this young person's mind with a romantic and impossible conception of her brother's character. Nevertheless, if the end was good, what matter for the means? Besides, is there any romance which lasts beyond the fourth week of the honeymoon?

'If you do not dislike him, my dear child, the way is already paved for love. But, indeed, I would not seek to persuade you. Ask, I say again, your own heart.'

All night long, Virginie lay tossing, disquiet, anxious. If she dropped asleep, dreadful dreams came to her. She was back at Mon Désir. Tom looked at her with reproachful eyes; the Professor held up hands at her and turned away in despair, reminding her that he had always loved her, and expected to be considered, after Tom; even Captain Kemyss, when he saw her coming slowly up the avenue of palms, dropped his face in his hands, as if he were ashamed of her.

But why? For surely a great thing for her, and a thing which her father would have liked;

and Captain Ferrier was the best of men, although of such sensitive and highly strung nature; and perhaps it would please Lord Ferrier; and Maude would like it; and Mrs. Hallowes would like it. And yet—and yet—some fear, some regret, some disappointment in her mind. And when she rose on the morning which was to be that of her betrothal it was with red eyes and a heavy heart.

'Guy,' Maude whispered before they parted. 'What did you say to Virginie to-night?'

'I could not say much with all of you in the room. What I am to say to-morrow will please you, Maude.'

'I hope it will please her.'

'I suppose it will. Why shouldn't it? Most girls like to marry an eldest son. Besides . . . . Oh! of course it will please her.'

'And then . . . Guy . . . Guy . . . . Remember, a wife is not a sister.' The tears came into her eyes. . . . 'If you make her unhappy—as you have made me unhappy—I shall never forget that, if I had told her the truth, she would rather die than marry you. Yet, if not for you, for my father's sake I would do it again, whatever the consequences. I would rather that Virginie were unhappy than that his last years should be disgraced.'

'Thank you, Maude. You are a kind and

loving sister. You always contrive to say such pleasant things when a man has gone out of his way to please you.'

'I say the truth to you, now and then, because I cannot help it, I suppose. Good-night, Guy! You have got all my little fortune; you have got all the money you can raise on your reversionary interests; you are loaded and crushed with debts; you have gambled everything away. There is this one chance left you—a sweet and true-hearted girl, who will love you for yourself if you show her a grain of sympathy, and who will bring you a fortune that will set you up for life, unless you throw that away as well. But I know—oh! I know—what will be the end of it. It is all I can do for you, Guy; your last chance—your last chance. And God forgive you if . . . .' Her voice broke, and she left him.

Guy looked after her angrily.

'What the devil,' he said, 'has come to Maude to-night? As for Virginie——'

Then he thought of the money-bags, and that sweet vision of green cloth floated before his eyes, and he smiled. What mattered Maude's anger or Virginie's happiness, compared with the glorious fight with chance lying almost within his grasp? He went to his club, and drank a brandy-and-soda. Then he remembered the interview which he must have, some time, with his wife. His conscience was pretty well dead within him ; but yet he did seem to remember that there was an ugly word in three syllables which stood for a certain unlawful thing, only possible to be committed by men already once married. But, then!—pah!—absurd! Violet would be only too glad to accept her release.

CHAPTER V.

THE ENGAGEMENT.

In the morning Captain Ferrier made a mistake which is common, indeed, but always fatal—that is to say, he put the cart before the horse. In other words, he reckoned his chickens before they were hatched. To be more precise, because he wanted a thing to happen he supposed that it was going to happen, even though rivers would have to run up hills and rain to fall out of cloudless skies. To be intelligible to the meanest comprehension, he neglected to follow an old precept, designed for such as himself, which teaches that it is well to be off with the old love before you are on with the new. Bluebeard owed the greatest successes of his romantic career to remembering this proverb, which Captain Ferrier forgot. To come to facts, he called upon Virginie before he called upon Violet. Now, it was most essential for the successful conduct of his case that the latter should fall in with his views and be a consenting party to that ugly word of six letters and three syllables.

Virginie received him with a conscious blush, because, of course, she knew well what he came to say. She was still actively engaged in following Mrs. Hallowes's advice—namely, in asking her own heart. Nothing is more difficult to do, when you come to try it. For, first, how are you to put your questions? What questions are you to put? And suppose you get no answer—what are you to do next? This was exactly poor Virginie's case. She wanted to find out how she should like to marry her cousin, and she could not get the least glimpse or foreshadowing of what would happen, or how things might be, either towards happiness or repentance in the future. Nor could she understand herself as Guy Ferrier's daily companion. If she had been older, more experienced, a reader of novels or of poetry, she would have understood perfectly well that there was no fluttering of her heart at the prospect before her, and that she cared nothing at all about the man, but only respected an ideal. Also she would have understood that what Mrs. Hallowes and ladies like unto her mean by the phrase of asking one's heart is to be interpreted in the sense of 'consider the establishment and the position.' But this she did not understand, and it would have been incredible to her that her cousin, this soul of honour and fine feeling, could esteem her fortune as of the least importance in asking her to be his wife. She was as yet little more than a child in experience, though eighteen years of age: she knew nothing more of society than she had learned from four months with Mrs. Hallowes, and even that lady knew nothing about the personal character of Captain Ferrier. To be sure, the personal character of the heir to a peerage must be very, very bad to form an obstacle to marriage; yet there are some vices, of which the inveterate vice of gambling is one, which cannot be overlooked even by women of the world. English girls teach each other and learn from books and the talk of their elders the true meaning, the proportion, the value of things, especially of money and rank, concerning which no 'class of persons' can be said to feel more strongly or to distinguish more correctly. But who was to teach this young colonial that nothing is what it seems to be, and that we build our social structure on make-believe and assumption?

In one of the queer, wild *desréglés* romances of the last century, when the French, like the Russians of the present day, were busy tearing every social institution up by the roots to see whether it would not grow equally well with the roots up and the head down, there was a certain ingenious Abbé, who wrote the history of a young lady brought up in a single room, and introduced to the outside world after she arrived at years of womanhood. Naturally, she took a new, original, and quite unconventional view of the things which she saw. Virginie was in something of the same condition as the young lady brought up in the box. She believed what she was told, and what she saw. Therefore, when Maude told her how great and good and generous a man was her only brother, she naturally accepted the assurance, and wondered where so admirable a man would find a wife worthy of him. That she herself would be asked to occupy that position was, indeed, most amazing. And now he stood before her ; he bent over her ; he whispered in his low, full voice, which really sounded as if he was full of feeling.

'Virginie! you know why I am here. Will you bid me hope?'

She made no reply, because she did not know what to say.

'It is for my own happiness.' These were the words he had used last night ; and it did seem to Virginie, even at that moment, as if, at such a moment, there was more to be considered than her suitor's happiness.

Still she made no reply.

'My sister, Maude, will be pleased, I know. My father will be pleased, I am sure. Virginie, give me your hand.'

He took it. He held it. Then he stooped

and kissed her forehead. She had said nothing; not one word; but she was engaged.

Her lover dropped her hand and walked to the window, with a sigh. Why did he sigh? He stayed there for a few minutes without saying anything. Then he came back, and sat beside her.

He spoke slowly, and said little, and that little was strange. It was an arrangement, he repeated, in cold and measured words, that would be satisfactory to all concerned. It was necessary for him to marry; it was pleasant to marry his cousin; they would have an early day fixed; his father would, perhaps, be the best person to write to Captain Kemyss, and she should write to her mother, and perhaps she would tell Mrs. Hallowes, and so they could all go on just the same as before. 'Of course,' he said, 'I shall be delighted to do anything for you that I possibly can. You will, I know, command me. But about balls and evening-parties——'

'Oh! I do not want you to go anywhere unless you like.'

'Thank you. I am not fond of these social things. You greatly relieve me. It is very good of you.' He spoke with an approach to feeling, 'I always think that a pair of people who are going to be married look absurd going about together. So glad that you agree with me.'

Then he rose, and said that he believed there was no more to be said, and he kissed her again on the forehead and went away.

Poor Virginie had no experience in love-making, and had read few novels; but she had looked for the display of more feeling. Still, a man of Guy's refinement was not to be expected to make boisterous love, like a common rustic and an ungoverned person. Perhaps, however, he would say more when he recovered from the emotion under which he had been labouring—that sigh!—and when she herself recovered from her fright.

Then Mrs. Hallowes came into the room and asked her, with a smile, if she had seen Captain Ferrier, and then kissed her, and told her that she was a girl greatly to be envied, and that her own fortune, added to her lover's position, ought to enable her to take any place—any place she pleased—in Society. 'And then, my dear,' she said, 'you will remember me, and ask me to your very best parties.'

The happy lover went straight to his sister. He was feeling, in fact, pretty low about the thing he had done. Still, there was no cause for anxiety: not the least. The other person would be rejoiced to meet him half way. But he rather began to wish that he had paid the less pleasant visit first.

'I've done it, Maude,' he said, in deep and sepulchral tones.

'Done it! You mean that you have actually——'

'Yes. I'm engaged to the Creole girl. That's what I mean.'

'Oh! Guy. I am so happy and thankful. But why are you looking gloomy over it?'

'Because I feel gloomy.'

'I suppose I am a fool; but I confess I cannot sympathise with you, my brother.'

'No. I did not suppose you would.'

'It can't be money at such a moment.'

'It isn't money. It's worse than money, perhaps. Oh! Maude——'. Here he stopped. 'No. Now I'm engaged,' he added, more lightly, 'I shall go round and tell them all to wait.'

'There is no one—is there'—Maude asked suspiciously, 'that you would rather marry? You are not in love, somewhere else, are you, Guy?'

'In love! Women are always thinking of love. No; there is no one else I would rather marry. Come, Maude, never mind. Be pleased because you've got what you wanted, and I shall have the money—with the wife. Pity I can't borrow it of her, and let her marry someone else.'

'Do you happen to know—but, of course, you could not ask her—how it is settled?'

'I don't know. I suppose I shall get the spending of it, somehow, whichever way it is settled.'

'I asked Mrs. Hallowes once, but she does not know. Nor does she know how much it is. There is a charge on the estate for the mother for life; that is all she knows. Well, Guy'—she heaved a great sigh—'you will have it, whatever the amount is; but I hope, I sincerely hope, that it is all tied up and settled upon her, so that she cannot even sell out.'

'No one loses who can hold on,' said Guy, gravely. 'The devil of it is having to leave off just when your luck is on the turn. Don't be afraid, Maude. I shall do very well. Will you tell my father, or shall I?'

'Do you tell him, Guy. He will be greatly pleased, I am sure. Go now and tell him; and, for Heaven's sake, my dear boy, try not to look as if you were going to be hanged.'

'I wonder,' said Maude to herself. 'I wonder what it is—who it is. He says there is nobody he would rather marry. At one time I was afraid he might have got himself entangled. But it can't be that. Why has he always set his face against marriage? And shall—oh! shall I—get my jewels back?'

No; she will never get her jewels back, because now she has found out why Guy's engagement oppressed him with so profound a gloom.

Lord Ferrier was, indeed, greatly pleased. Nothing that his son had done pleased him so much. Indeed, the contemplation of his successor's career so far gave him little cause for gratification, although he knew nothing of the quagmire of debts, liabilities, money raised on reversionary interests and post obits in which Guy was plunged.

'I congratulate you,' he said, 'on your good taste and good judgment. Virginie is a most charming girl. I shall go this afternoon to tell her so, and to thank her for giving you her hand. Her fortune is considerable, and, properly husbanded, may help to win back some of our lost acres. You must regard it as a trust for thatpurpose, Guy. Think of your successors.'

'I will, sir,' said Guy, with conviction.

'I suppose that there is no need to hurry the wedding. We must first get the consent of her mother and her guardian, Captain Kemyss. It is now June. It will take two months or so to get their reply, which we may understand will be favourable. Let us hold the wedding in September, if that will do for everybody; and, considering that Virginie is already a daughter of the house, I think, Guy, that we should celebrate the event at The Towers. But all shall be as she wishes; all as she wishes.'

The old man began to make plans for the happiness of the young pair. They should live at The Towers, if they pleased; he wanted nothing but bachelor's quarters there: they could have the town house where they pleased, and so on.

'And, Guy, now that you are engaged, I think you should send in your papers. You have had nearly ten years' soldiering, which is five more than my allowance. A country gentleman owes duties to his country; and, if I were you, I would take up politics. Your wife, with her wonderful beauty and her manner, which is charming, is fitted to become a leader of society. She might even become to the Conservative cause what Lady Palmerston was to the Liberals. She should be of the greatest help to you, if you care for a political career. And why not, Guy? Why not? Surely there never was a time when there was a better opening for a man of ability. Think it over.'

'I will, sir,' said Guy. 'I will think it over.'

He went away, and his father fell to building castles in the air, based on the many virtues of his promised daughter-in-law. Then Maude came, and they talked together about it, and how wonderfully things had turned out as they wished, and what a remarkable Providence it was that a bride and a fortune should be found for Guy in so forgotten and obscure a place as Palmiste Island.

'Let the fortune be tied up,' said Maude, anxiously, 'so that Guy cannot touch any of it, or dispose of it.'

'By all means,' her father replied. 'Yet I like a wife to show some trust in her husband. All these arrangements should be left to her guardian. We will go and see Mrs. Hallowes this afternoon, Maude. Of course, you will be gracious to her. I have observed that you have always been kind to her. Perhaps with a view—Maude, is every woman a match-maker? We will go this afternoon, and we will bring gifts. I shall give her one of my pictures—the Joan of Arc, I think, or the Mary Queen of Scots. And we will find something pretty among the old gimcracks: something belonging to your great-grandmother, who was also her own. That she will value much better than if we bought her some new trinket in Bond Street. Come, Maude, let us go and turn over some of the pretty things.'

Thus was Virginie engaged: thus was she welcomed as a daughter by the old Lord and a sister by Maude. They all dined with Mrs.

Hallowes that evening. Guy was still silent and preoccupied, thinking over his great and singular happiness, no doubt. Virginie looked in vain for any words of the deeper heart, because none came at all. And even Mrs. Hallowes thought, though she said nothing, that a little attention was due from the young man to his *fiancée*; and that Captain Ferrier seemed certainly the coldest lover she had ever heard of. But Lord Ferrier saw nothing of this: he was the lover: he made Virginie sit beside him and held her hand in his, and stroked her hair, and whispered how happy she would make him in becoming his daughter, and what a lucky man was his son.

CHAPTER VI.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

The interview with Violet must be held sooner or later, because, from the very nature of the things to be said, they could not possibly be written. One may have no conscience—many men certainly have no conscience; but few men are destitute of common sense, and there is generally some caution in wickedness. Again, to put down in black and white—which may be read by anybody—an offer to your wife that she may, if she please, go and marry some one else, provided you are allowed the same liberty, would be, besides a very imprudent thing, a thing which might go straight to the head, and lead to repentance before the deed. This kind of repentance is regrettable, because it sometimes ends in preventing the crime altogether. Yet one wonders why it has not been preached up more. Again, if you go and make such an offer in words, you may be able to dress it up in flowers and figures of fancy, so that by persuasive art its great wickedness may be concealed, and its general advantages alone remain in sight. Now the general advantages of a clean slate are obvious to all.

Guy knew his wife's address, because it was the old one. He knew that she still lived with Paul Perigal, as she had done in former days. He called at the house the next morning at twelve. Miss Lovelace was not returned from the theatre; he would wait for her. No; he would not give his card. Miss Lovelace would see him when she came home.

He walked upstairs with the air of a man who knew his way about the house, and went into the drawing-room.

A young lady—rather a pretty girl—rose as he came in.

'Pardon me,' said Guy, astonished; 'I am waiting to see Miss Lovelace.'

The girl gathered up some work.

'I will tell her,' she said. 'Perhaps she will not be home for half an hour. But Mr. Perigal will be back immediately.'

'I do not want to see Mr. Perigal at all,' said Guy, rudely. 'May I ask, if you please, who you are?'

'I am the boy's governess and companion'—it was, in fact, Elsie; 'and at present he is asleep.'

And then she knew, by the change in her

visitor's face and the sudden look of resemblance, to whom she was talking.

'I will go,' she said, hastily; and fairly ran out of the room.

'A governess!' He had forgotten the boy. 'Already a governess. Yes; he must be in his sixth year. By gad! And Violet has got on.' He looked about him. The room was hung with bright curtains; there were flowers in the window; it was papered and painted in the new style; on the walls were pictures, some of them good; there were choice cups and all kinds of pretty things in cabinets. 'She *has* got on. In the old days there was a ragged carpet here, and it was the girl's school-room, where she learned to act; and a table with marks of beer, and pipes on the mantelshelf; and an old man in a shabby coat.'

'I think—oh! Mr. Perigal, don't go upstairs. I think'—cried Elsie, below, in great agitation—'it is her husband come back again. A tall man with dark eyes. When I said I was the governess, he scowled. Shall I go upstairs and watch beside the boy? Shall I call a policeman?'

'I will beard him,' said the actor, solemnly.

When the door opened and the old man appeared, Guy perceived that he was transformed as well—that is, his coat was no longer shabby. Violet's success meant new coats and new boots for her old friend—it would also, let us add, have meant honourable retirement to her father, the carpenter, and her mother, the dresser; but they would have died out of harness—and new furniture for the house, and newness and brightness generally, with a good deal of champagne, which Paul regarded, just as the young man of the present day, as the drink of the gods. The old man also had a beautiful new wig, curly, well combed, and as black as when he was freshly entering upon the thirties. Also his eyebrows were beautifully pencilled, so that if he could have hidden the crow's-feet and shaken a more jaunty leg he might have passed for forty.

'Oh!' said Paul, recognising him. 'You are the man, are you? You are—the—man.' He spoke with a hissing breath between every word, which is one way, and very effective too, of expressing contempt.

'What the devil ——' began Guy.

'You are my Violet's husband; and a pretty husband too. You desert her a year after you married her; you send her back without a penny in her pocket for her baby and herself; you leave her for five years; and when she makes her mark and begins to command her price you come back to stand in with her. That is the kind of man, sir, you are.'

It was remarkable about Paul Perigal that, even when in deepest earnest, he used old catchwords of the stage. Sometimes they were so very old that they had long since lost their force.

'Good Lord!' said Guy, taken completely aback at this unexpected charge. He expected to be accused of cruelty, and of neglect, and desertion; but it did not occur to him that his visit would be construed into an attempt to live upon his wife's salary. Yet the suggestion gave him a hint, which he was not slow to act upon. They were afraid that he would claim a husband's rights over her money, were they? Good.

'We are no longer, however,' Paul Perigal went on, 'without defenders. We have friends. It is no more a question of one old man—nobody but myself—standing between the serpent and his victim-che-yild.' He really was quite desperately in earnest; but he had personated virtuous indignation so often on the stage that in real emotion he naturally fell back upon the language of melodrama. 'We have but to raise our hands, and all London would rise in defence of its favourite, the fair and accomplished Violet—my pupil—your innocent victim—Mr.—Mr.—Marry-er-under-false-names!'

'You are an old fool!' said Guy.

What Paul wonld have said in reply, one knows not. While he was gathering himself together for the effort of retort, Violet herself burst into the room. She heard downstairs that a gentleman was waiting for her, and she divined who her visitor might be.

'How dare you come to this house?' she asked, with resolution in her eye.

'I see,' said Guy, slowly. He was sitting in her easiest and most comfortable chair, and did not go through the formality of rising for purposes of greeting or courtesy. 'I see that success has not changed your temper.'

'Daddy,' said Violet, quietly, 'leave us alone. No, I am not in the least afraid of the man, I assure you.' She shut the door after him, and then, standing beside the table, looked her husband in the face, not defiantly, but as one who has the command of the situation.

'I want to talk to you, quietly, and without heroics. If you please to listen——'

'Go on,' said Violet. 'The very sight of you fires my blood—but go on—go on—let me hear you.'

'What I have to say shall be brief. When we parted it was on the understanding that we should never at any time trouble one another again.'

'It was. Then why do you come here?'

'You told me to go my way, and you would go yours.'

'I did. I have gone my way. It has been

a hard and toilsome way: but I have won what I wanted.'

'Very good, I shall not seek to disturb you in the possession of anything that you may have won if you agree to my proposition. I have gone my way, too. But I have not been so fortunate as you. I have lost what I hoped to win.'

'Oh!' She meant to imply that she cared nothing at all whether he won or lost.

'I am now,' he continued, 'a perfectly ruined man. There is nothing left. I have raised money on my reversionary interests till they are mortgaged to the hilt; I have debts which must be paid—somehow—debts of honour. There is one way by which I can pay those debts.'

'What do your debts concern me?'

'They might concern you very seriously. Of course you know that, as your husband, I have the right to draw all your pay.'

Violet turned pale. That was what Paul had told her.

'Draw my pay? But we are separated.'

'That makes no difference unless we are separated under a bond and agreement, which is not the case. However, the question may not arise. I only mentioned it to show that my creditors might, if they pleased——'

'Go on.'

'There is, I said, one way out of the difficulty. It is nothing for you to consent to—in fact, you will be the greatest gainer by it—which is why I expect you to agree—and yet it is everything for me. Tell me, is there the least chance of any present or future reconciliation between us?'

'Never—never—never.' Her resolute lips were set firm. She meant it. The wounds inflicted on her by this man were still fresh in her memory. She would never forget them.

'Quite so. And what I expected—and hoped. Yes; hoped, by Jove,' he said, in the hard and cruel tones which had formerly maddened her.

'We regard each other,' he went on, 'with profound aversion. We do not wish ever to meet again, not even to hear from each other. Is not that the case?'

'It is.'

'Then, Violet,' he said, springing to his feet, 'make the separation complete. We were married in secret. We will be divorced in secret. I give you your liberty. Go; marry—if you please—and anyone you please. I am sorry to have stood in your light so long. You are bound no longer—we are divorced.'

He spoke rapidly, gesticulating with his hands.

'You agree?' he asked.

She was carried away by his impetuous

words; she was on the point of accepting the release offered her, when, fortunately, the old distrust of all he did or said came back to her, and she hesitated.

'You make me free,' she said, 'on condition of my making you free in return. Is that so?'

'Certainly. It is not a gift which I offer you. I have no gifts for you. The time of making gifts is past and gone long ago. This is a bargain.'

'It is a bargain,' she repeated. 'If I accept it——'

'If you accept it,' he interposed, 'you will be free to make any match you please among your numerous admirers. No one will know anything of the past; nobody need know. I was married as plain Richard Johnson, you in your own name of Emily Hicks. The only witnesses were your own father and the old actor. They can be squared, I suppose. Who would identify Richard Johnson with me? Who would find Emily Hicks in Violet Lovelace?'

'I should be free to marry again. But suppose I do not want to marry again?'

'Hang it! you will some day.'

'And you—if I accept—will also marry again.'

'Yes; I shall marry a woman with money.'

'Do you love her?'

'What has that got to do with the thing? She has money; I want money.'

'Yes,' she was trying to put the matter quite clearly before herself. 'And if I do not accept?'

'Then—many things will happen to you—and to me—and you will discover that the bond of husband and wife may lead to disagreeable surprises. Come, Violet, do not be revengeful, even if I seem at first to have the best of the bargain. In the long run——'

'And when he grows up—when the boy asks me who was his father—what am I to say?'

'Richard Johnson, Gentleman, Deceased. Poor Dick! Wipe your eyes. Call him Johnson. Show the boy your marriage lines. Speak tenderly of his father.'

'And the boy's rights?'

'What rights?'

'Your heir's rights—what of them? No; when the boy is of age he shall know the truth.'

Guy pondered. When the boy came of age. That would be in sixteen years' time. Sixteen years. The curate who had married them had long since forgotten the obscure couple who stood before him one cold day in November. The witnesses, Paul Perigal and Hicks, the carpenter, would most certainly be dead in sixteen years. Who was to identify him with Richard Johnson? Who could prove that the Richard Johnson, the undoubted husband of Violet, was himself—Guy Ferrier? And as for letters from him, there was not one—he remembered with infinite satisfaction —not one, because he had never written her a single letter.

'I agree,' he said, softly and persuasively, 'to acknowledging the boy as my heir when he is of age. Till then, you can keep him out of the way. Now, Violet, once more consider my proposal. Let me go free; let me marry without creating any scandal; go and marry yourself, if you like. If you do this, you will have the boy to yourself; you can bring him up anyhow you please. When he is of age, but not before, tell him that he is to be the next Lord Ferrier. Bring him to me, and you will be heartily glad that——'

'What kind of things will happen to me?' she asked.

'First of all, there will be an almighty smash. Then, everybody will know that the beautiful Violet Lovelace is the wife of the man who has smashed, and his creditors will include her money in the estate.'

'And the Boy—oh! the Boy,' she cried.

'A man is always allowed to have the custody of his boy at the age of seven. The boy is now, I suppose, about five. I shall most certainly, if you do not accept my terms, take away the boy as soon as he is seven years old. Understand me quite clearly. I am not at all the man to be moved by your crying and tears. The boy shall be mine as soon as he is seven years of age.'

The mother's cheek grew pale.

'There is no act of cruelty or wickedness,' she said, 'that you would not commit. But have my boy you shall not, so long as there is a house in England where I may hide him. What next will happen?'

'The boy will be the heir to a title, and nothing else.'

'He is that, already. For I suppose you will spend all the money there is.'

Violet had never played in any piece where there had been mention of entail. She therefore knew nothing about the laws of real property. People have different opportunities and privileges of acquiring knowledge. An actress learns the secrets of the outside world by the parts she plays.

Guy was about to explain to her that it might be necessary to cut off the entail by consent of the tenant in possession, his father, and himself, but, as he saw that she knew nothing of the subject, he forbore.

'I will acknowledge him. I daresay we shall find a way out of the row about my second marriage, if there is to be any row. Is not this a fair offer? If you do not accept it, you will have to fight for your money and for your boy; because I will lay my hands on both.'

'I must consider,' said Violet, presently. 'I do not know what traps you may be laying. I must consider. I will send you a reply.'

'Nonsense,' he said, roughly. 'What is the use of considering? The thing is perfectly plain. Nothing could be simpler. If you were to consider for a twelvemonth, it could not be plainer.'

'No. I will not decide without consideration. I will send you a reply. Now, if you please, go.'

'If you hate me, as I believe you do, Violet; if you desire never to see or hear from me again, you will accept.'

'I do, from my very soul, desire never to see you again. I am a most unhappy woman because I ever fell in your way. Yet I will not accept your offer without further consideration. Listen! Do you hear that voice?'

It was the boy. He had awakened from his morning nap, and Elsie was bringing him, laughing and prattling, downstairs, to have his dinner.

'That is your son's voice. Would you like to see him?'

'No.' This evidence of the child's existence startled and alarmed him. 'No. I do not wish to see the boy.'

'I am glad I heard him, for he has made me very certain I can accept nothing at your hands without consideration. He reminds me, too—could I have forgotten it?—that your offer to me is a mockery. How should I marry, having to tell that boy his secret? How should I commit this dreadful crime that you propose and dare to look upon the boy and to tell him that secret? How could I bring upon the innocent child shame for his mother? That shame, at least, he shall never feel. I am an actress; that I cannot help. Why, if I could help it, I would not, because it is my pride and joy. I do not think the boy will ever be ashamed of his mother's profession. If he is to be ashamed, it shall be of his father. So—I refuse your proposal.'

'Violet, you are a fool; you do not know what you are doing—you do not consider. . . . . Remember . . . . I do not use idle threats——'

'Do what you like—what you can. I refuse your offer. Offer? It is no offer; it is not in your power to give me back my freedom. What a fool I was not to see that from the first! No one can. Nothing but death can cut that miserable tie. There is my answer. And now, if you please, go!'

'One moment, Violet. You can, if you

please, set up your back and refuse your consent; but you had better not. Now I modify my offer. You will do as you like. I care nothing at all whether you marry or whether you do not. All I say is, let me do what I please without molestation or fear of interference. Yes; yes I know what you are going to say. Who is there who will tell you that the man you married six years ago has married again? Don't interfere with me, and then I will not interfere with you. If you stand between me and my proposed marriage, then—Miss Violet Lovelace, or Mrs. Ferrier, or whatever you call yourself—remember that you have a desperate man to deal with.'

'And yet I will not promise anything. No—I will consider, before all, the rights of the boy. But I will think it over. If it were not for him, I would let you commit this crime without a word. Because of my boy, because I am a mother, I think not only of him but of the other poor creature whom you are going to delude and lead into misery. Oh! Guy, if you could see yourself as those who know you see you! If you could see the miserable, contemptible figure you cut, when, no doubt, you think you are a gallant gentleman! Go—you are but a sneak and a coward.'

He made no reply; but he went away. As he opened the street-door he heard the voice of the boy again shouting and laughing. But this did not soften his heart..

He walked westward, among the squares of Bloomsbury, thinking what he would do. He might break his engagement with Virginie and let the smash come, and await the consequences. He might go on with it, and let Violet do what she pleased. That was the best thing to do. Probably she would do nothing. She would be too much afraid of his wrath to do anything. He could take the boy; he could spend her money; he could make himself infernally disagreeable. Yes; he would go on. She would submit. And as soon as these two witnesses to his marriage were dead he would snap his fingers at Violet and bid her do her worst.

CHAPTER VII.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

When the engagement was fairly and happily accomplished, Maude sat down and breathed more freely. If her brother was in debt and difficulties, her father knew nothing, and, for the present, need know nothing. Perhaps a turn might be taken for the better. Perhaps Guy might be influenced by a wife.

'I shall expect you,' she told him, 'to pay Virginie the attention she deserves. You must pretend to be in love with her, if you are not. Meantime leave her to me. I have already led her to believe you are a second King Arthur—Heaven forgive me! I must manage, somehow, so that the drop from imagination to reality may prove less than . . . than you have given me reason to expect.'

'Do you think,' he replied, sulkily, 'that I shall cuff and kick her? Come, Maude, don't be gloomy. You egged me on. I didn't want to marry the girl. You ought to be happy about it.'

'So I should be, Guy, if I could think that any happiness will come to any of us out of it. And it is my doing, whatever comes. Well,' she sighed, 'do not get into any fresh difficulties until your wedding day. And—oh! Guy; can you—can you keep away from the tables for a little while—only till the autumn?'

He laughed, but not cheerfully. Because he meant that he was not going even to try to keep away from the tables. It was not in order to abstain from the one thing he loved that he was going to run this frightful risk of marriage. Not at all. Quite the contrary. But, then, women are never reasonable.

When one reads how the most worshipful the Lord Mayor, and with him a following of amiable people, lift up their voices against the wickedness of the French in allowing Monaco to continue, one is reminded of a certain text about a mote and a beam, inasmuch as for every franc which is daily lost and won in that wicked peninsula ten thousand are daily lost and won in the hells of this most virtuous city of West London. Yet my Lord Mayor maketh no sign. If, indeed, hypocrisy be chiefly known in the condemnation of sins to which we are secretly addicted, or to which we feel no attraction, then, indeed, we are a nation of the most gigantic hypocrites—Patagonian hypocrites. We hold indignation meetings about the opium trade—and our people are being ruined, body and brain, by bad drinks worse than any opium; we hold up our hands at the buying and selling of slaves; yet we allow women to work twelve hours a day for four shillings a week; and by this underpayment of women's labour, our long hours of shops, and in a hundred other ways, we keep our white slaves, and grow rich upon their labour. All these things make one long for a Prophet, because, if I understand the Prophetic character aright, his most important function—a very uncomfortable one—was to make people see clearly their own wickedness, and the evil things lying under their very noses. No doubt Ahab, before Elijah came, was often indignant when he thought of the abominable wickedness of his Syrian neighbour, Benhadad.

As my Lord Mayor and his friends have not yet spoken on the subject, there exist, for the convenience of young men like Captain Ferrier, half a dozen clubs, where the noble game of baccarat, not to speak of écarté, picquet, napoleon, pitch and toss, loo, lansquenet, and many other ingenious devices for the exchange of money—the humbling of the mighty for good, and the exalting of the poor for a season—may be enjoyed. They are chiefly maintained by and for the gilded youth and the youth who are believed to be gilded. These young men of the modern time take their fling in a manner not unworthy of their ancestors, save that for punch they substitute champagne; and for beer, champagne; and for port, champagne; and that they do not laugh much, and are generally rather low in their spirits, and therefore need the stimulus of champagne at breakfast and at luncheon, and at dinner, and at the chiming of the midnight bells, and at early matins. They 'fling' in many directions; but for the present one has only to do with their favourite pastime of the midnight baccarat.

Guy's engagement at first brought him luck. Everybody knows how luck follows luck, just as misfortunes crowd thick upon each other. His tradesmen, whose name was legion, suddenly changed their front, and showed an amount of confidence which was exhilarating, and made him feel like buying everything; the men who held his promissory notes ceased to look anxious; the gentleman who had advanced him money on his reversionary interests began to consider prayerfully the subject of the marriage settlements; and, in addition, he had a steady flow of luck nearly every night. So that he really began to consider the girl who was the cause of all this as a most praiseworthy person, deserving of admiration.

He had to be seen with her a good deal in those early days, though, happily, his father took his place, and was never bored with Virginie's society, as he was himself; and was not wishing constantly to be back again tempting Fortune, as he did. It is not every engaged man who has a father willing to take so much arduous work off one's hands. Then Maude was useful, and, between the two, Guy really found that a daily call, or perhaps a dinner at Mrs. Hallowes's house, was quite as much as need be expected of a man.

Love-making, under these conditions, fell very, very far short of what poor Virginie expected. There was nothing in it, after all. She was engaged; her lover came most days to see her, and stayed a quarter of an hour, and seemed anxious to get away again: if nobody was in the room he sometimes kissed her forehead coldly; he communicated nothing about himself, his pursuits, his reading, his ambition; nor was he in the least curious about her own—a humiliating thing for a girl not to be thought worth a little curiosity.

It must be her task, Virginie thought, to make him believe her capable of his confidence. That would, doubtless, come in time. Meanwhile, a little expression of feeling, a little ardour, a little warmth of manner seemed wanting even to this inexperienced girl. In what a different voice had Tom—her 'brother' Tom—as Mrs. Hallowes called him—told her that he loved her! Even the Professor, who owned that he must come after Tom, spoke of his affection for her with warmer voice and greater show of passion. But men are, doubtless, different: this man of reserve kept his deeper feelings in his own heart. Virginie would get at them in time.

'My dear,' said Maude, smiling, though she looked anxious, when the girl confided these thoughts to her, 'do not make an idol or a god of your husband. You know, in a sister's eyes, it is difficult for a brother to do wrong. But a wife is not a sister. You, who will be with him constantly—Virginie's heart sank at the prospect, though she knew not why—'will find faults in him of which I know nothing. You will have to excuse them.'

'Guy,' she said, passionately, 'have you no heart?'

'What is the matter now, Maude?'

'It is your neglect of that poor girl. What do you look for? A more beautiful woman? There are no more beautiful women.'

'What am I to do, then?'

'Pretend that you are in love with her. I have no patience! Oh! But for one thing—but for my father's sake—I would break it off even now.'

'Don't do that, Maude. Come, I will go and buy her something. It can't be paid for till after the wedding; so it does not signify.'

'Oh! Guy'—his absolute inability to see what was wanted made her laugh—'one hopes you may make a better husband than lover.'

For some reason, he scowled and became moody; and that something was not bought. He remembered, in fact, that he was already a husband, and not successful in that profession; also that he had as yet received no letter of submission from Violet—a thing which he confidently looked for. This made him feel ill-used.

Then Maude took Virginie with her to see The Towers, their country house. It was a splendid old place, worth seeing, if only for its age, for the memories of the many generations who had lived there, and for the accumulations of treasures forming part of the family history; a picturesque old place, many-gabled, built of warm red brick, standing among its gardens and trees; a stately and proud old place, fit home for an old English family.

'This,' she said, taking her visitor to the rooms, 'will all, some day, be yours, as it was your great-grandmother's. I hope you like this prospect, fair Châtellaine.'

'Oh!' Virginie gasped, 'Maude, it is wonderful?'

It is, indeed, truly wonderful to go over an old house belonging to an old family who have kept themselves and their things together. The family portraits, the books, the arms and armour, the furniture, the plate, the china, the very staircases and landings, the windows, the gables, the roof of the house, are all things that cannot be bought.

'I have never felt before,' Virginie whispered, 'what it meant to possess ancestors. Here one feels what it may mean. All these things speak to us; they belong to us, but we belong to them. In this old place one seems to hear, day and night, the voices of the dead. They are calling to us to keep up the honour of the House.'

'Yes,' said Maude, 'I feel the same thing every time I come here. It is the place of our ancestors. We are among them all. It cannot be but that their spirits haunt the place which we all of us have loved so well. From generation to generation, from father to son, we have been English gentlefolk; not great statesmen or great generals; but we have taken our share and done our work. Not one but has kept the scutcheon spotless; not one who has disgraced'——. Here she stopped, and her eyes filled with tears, because she thought of one who had already gone so far as to bring sorrow and shame upon them, for whose sake she had done her best to bring sorrow and shame upon the girl with her.

Virginie took her hand, thinking that Maude's tears were due to her respect and love for her ancestors.

'It is a great thing, Maude,' she said, 'to belong to this House; it is a very solemn thing to marry the heir. Forgive me if I seem to think too little of it.'

'No, dear; I was not thinking of that. See! here is a portrait of Guy as a child. Its companion picture is of a former Guy, Lord Ferrier, taken at the same age, in the time of Charles the First. Do you see the wonderful likeness in the boys? Yet there are two hundred years between them, and one is dust and ashes. There is another of the same Lord Ferrier, taken later on, after the Restoration.'

That whole day they spent among the portraits and the family pictures. Maude knew all their histories, and Virginie, for the first time, learned the Romance of a great House whose history has been preserved. It makes one weep to think how our middle-class people neglect their genealogies, so that they know nothing of their own people, and have no pride, and learn no lessons from the past. Cannot something be done, my friends? Can we not write the annals of our own generation, each for his own family, so that whatever the fate of our children and grandchildren, they, too, may feel that they have ancestors who lived, and loved, and hoped, and made a little success, perhaps, and died and were forgotten, as they, too, in their turn, shall die?

'Oh!' cried the Creole girl, 'my father told me so little of all these things.'

'He did not know,' said Maude. 'No one knows except myself. My father knows something; Guy, nothing. The women of the House keep up its memories, not the men. That matters nothing, if they are true to their name and its ambitions.'

Then they hunted among the old books in the library, and examined the tapestry, the collections, the engravings, and the heaps of things belonging to their ancestors still preserved in this strange and wonderful museum. Virginie returned to town strengthened as to her engagement. Her lover might be cold, but he was the heir; it was a great thing to marry the future Master of the Towers.

Guy showed no interest in her visit, and seemed to care little for the old place of which his father and sister were so proud. 'Could,' asked Virginie, 'could he be one of those who are deaf to the voice of the dead?'

Alas! He was deaf to every voice; he heard nothing, he saw nothing; if all his ancestors had appeared to him—ghostly phantoms pointing long fingers of warning, showing him the future that lay before him—he would have closed his eyes and gone on his way heedless. Other men, given to vices more repulsive, can listen to the voice of conscience or the calls of honour and duty.

Drunkards get hot coppers and see triangles and rats and dogs, and repent and bang their heads with their fists and call themselves hard names. Wrathful men, who break the third commandment and the furniture, are ashamed when the fit is over. Envious men, backbiters, downcriers, have moments of sorrow when they feel mean. Even house agents sometimes regret that they must always play the game so low. The gambler alone never thinks, or heeds, or feels any emotion for his fellow-creatures. He is concentrated in himself; he is self-contained; he feels no interest, has no anxiety, takes no part or share in anything save only the chances of the cards. The voices of the dead! If the voices of the living can do nothing for such men what can we expect of the dead?

CHAPTER VIII.

HER SIMPLE DUTY.

Three days—four days—a fortnight passed over during which Violet sent no message of submission at all, and her husband felt more ill-used and more indignant.

She was thinking: the longer she thought over the matter the more difficult it was to act. She had, to be sure, refused his proposal with contempt; but she exaggerated her own helplessness; she was ignorant and did not know what safeguards may be gained by claiming protection of the law. She was in the false position of a wife not owned by her husband's friends. She did not think of putting herself in a lawyer's hands, still less did she contemplate the possibility of taking the child to his grandfather, and asking his protection, for she was firmly convinced that in any contest with her husband, all his relations would combine to bring the weight of their united influence against her. The wicked nobleman theory is not yet quite exploded. Indeed, there are plenty of agitators who still try to lash their auditors into a rage by depicting the vices of the bloated Lords.

She was afraid. She might let her husband do what he proposed to do—that is, marry again, just as if she did not exist; or she might forbid the marriage. In the former cases he would be rewarded by an open acknowledgment of her son's true position after sixteen years; but how was she to prove after sixteen years that 'Richard Johnson' was Guy Ferrier? And if she could not prove that, her boy's rights would have been wilfully and wastefully thrown away. In the latter case, if she refused her consent, who would protect her and the boy from her husband's interference?

After a fortnight of anxious consideration she took Paul Perigal into her counsels and told him for the first time the whole story, and her husband's true name and the latest proposition he had made.

'You wait,' he said, 'for sixteen years. So much interval between the acts. The boy has grown a man. You take him—yourself closely veiled—to the lordly castle of his ancestors; you say to him, "Boy, this is yours!" If his father is living, you bring his son to him. He will be laid up with gout—they always are at five-and-forty. You will say, "My Lord, I restore to you—your son and heir. I am your wife!" Then "who," cries her Ladyship, clutching her hair with wild gesture and despairing eyes, "who am I?" It seems a strong part to play, Violet.'

'And who's to prove it, Daddy?'

'I can prove it, Violet. You forget that you have me—always.'

You can't *tell* an old man of eighty that in all human probability he will be dead in sixteen years.

'If we were to try any other plan, Daddy?'

He reflected.

'There used to be a situation in . . . what was the name of it? They played it at the Adelphi . . . The Bridal Party interrupted . . . the appearance of the real wife—"I forbid the ceremony"—Shrieks of the Bride—Impotent Rage of the Villain.'

Violet shook her head.

'I've always got to remind you, Daddy, that we play now for the half-guinea stalls, not for the pit and gallery.'

There was no use in consulting the old man. His views were too narrowly professional. Violet returned to her silent musings, and found no help there.

'What is the matter, Violet?' asked Elsie, who had observed with concern the most unusual phenomenon of a failure in her employer's usually robust appetite.

'Elsie, I am truly miserable.'

'I have seen it,' said Elsie, 'for a week and more. Can I help you?'

'No, child, you cannot; unless you find me a man to advise with. I want an honest man and a wise man.'

'I think I know the very man; that is, if you would consult with a friend of mine. He is a gentleman—a University scholar; and he is going to be a great writer. He lives with us.' Here she remembered her dreadful deception, and she blushed a rosy red and went on, speaking fast:—'And oh! Violet, I must confess to you. When you said you wanted a real lady I ought not to have come, because my father was only a small clerk and my mother lets lodgings, and if it had not been for Mr. Percival I should never have been educated at all. Now, please, send me away, because I have deceived you.'

'My dear child,' said Violet, 'what a fuss about nothing at all! Send you away! Why, what would the boy do without you? And did you suppose I thought your father was a Viscount? Goodness me! he was a Crutch and Toothpick swell compared with mine, who is nothing in the world but a carpenter at Drury Lane—poor old dear! And what was your father, Daddy?' For Paul was standing beside them.

'Hum!' he replied. 'My father—now with

the angels . . . was . . . in fact—he was . . . but

> 'When Fortune means to men most good,
> She looks upon them with a threatening eye.'

'You see, Elsie,' said Violet. 'So, there, nothing more need be said. And about this Mr. Percival, I can't ask a stranger here and begin—Once there was a girl. Would he call upon me if you ask him? Most men would like the chance,' she added, with a laugh.

'He admires you very greatly,' said Elsie. 'We often go together to the pit to see you. He isn't rich, you know.'

'Together? Why—Elsie—you, of all people in the world!'

'Oh! no . . . no . . . no,' she cried, blushing. 'It isn't that—of all things. Oh! pray don't think it is that. Why, Mr. Percival has known me for years. He used to lodge with us long ago. And he must be getting on for thirty years of age now.'

'What a great age. But yet . . . Well, Elsie, about this friend of yours. It seems a foolish thing to have no one to ask for advice—to have to ask a stranger. But yet . . . You are sure he is a wise man.'

'Oh! he is very wise.'

'And would he come?'

'He would if I were to ask him, I think.'

'I don't see what I can do. I must ask somebody. Well, Elsie, ask him, please. If he will be so good as to interest himself in a stranger's affairs I will see him if he will come to me. Tell him that I am in trouble, and want the advice of a sensible man with discretion. To think that of all the men I know there is not one to whom I can go and ask for a little real advice. Never be an actress, child; because it is all show and make-believe, and people get to think you have no thoughts, no feelings, no hopes, and no anxieties of your own. You must always look and talk as if there was nothing but laughing in the world.'

Elsie opened upon the subject that very evening, but with little effect; because Mr. Percival was agitated about quite another matter, and could think and talk of nothing else. Yet he promised to see Miss Violet Lovelace. The business Elsie said was connected with her husband, who had come back, and, she supposed, wanted money.

'It will end,' he said, 'in her going to a solicitor, and getting a deed of separation in order to protect her and her child. Well; I will go with you, Elsie, but I do not suppose I can do much. I am not a lawyer nor a solicitor, nor do I know how to apply the screw to gentlemen who wish to live upon the labours of their wives. Three dozen at a cart-tail one might recommend, but the absurd law of the land does not allow it.'

What had happened that day was this—

Percival received a confidential letter from Palmiste—from the Pink Boy, in fact. As the accountant of the bank, where the strictest confidence should be observed, he ought not to have written the letter. But he was young, and anxiety for his friends may be pleaded as an excuse.

'It is all over, I fear,' he wrote, 'with Mon Désir. The poor old Captain has got a most awful bad crop; the estate won't pay working expenses this year, and I know that we can't advance any more money upon it. What he will do I cannot tell, but he will most certainly, unless he can raise any more money, have to become bankrupt. Then the estate will be sold. It seems hard after all these years. Can you go and tell Miss Ferrier? Her mother and Madame Kemyss do not know, I should think, anything about it. And even the Squire himself knows very little. She might be able to raise some money. She will be of age in a year or two; meanwhile the money is wanted at once. It is hard that her thousands should be lying idle, so to speak, without being useful to the man who has been so good a trustee for her. Go and see her at once, and tell her eight thousand or so would pull the old man through this year, and next year one may hope for a better crop. It is very unlucky that the little touch of a cyclone which passed over us in March seems to have picked out Mon Désir, above all others, for damage. Tom looks rather haggard over something, but even he doesn't know the whole danger. Perhaps he is haggard about Virginie. I'm a good deal worn myself—you wouldn't know me again—and the Padre isn't the same man since she went away. I suppose I mustn't send my love, and perhaps if I did you would not be the man to take it. Don't be mean, and try to cut out Tom. But we hear that she is always with her great cousins. If she *should* go and marry that beast of a man——'

Thus far the Pink Boy.

Percival lost no time at all in taking the letter to Virginie. He went that very morning.

'Why,' she asked, 'do you never come to see me?'

'Because it isn't safe. In this country we know our level; I belong to Grub Street; you to Mayfair. Because you are a young lady of fashion, and I am only an obscure person whose fortune for the moment is out at elbows.'

'But we are old friends,' said Virginie. 'You ought to have come here long ago. Sit down and let us talk.'

Then Percival unfolded his tale.

'Oh!' cried Virginie. 'It is dreadful. Something must be done. What can be done? Can't he use my money?'

'You can ask some lawyer here to lend you money, which you must pay to the bank to his account. I can think of no other way. And I am so ignorant of money matters that I do not even know how to advise you; but then any lawyer will know.'

'I will ask Guy,' said Virginie.

'Your cousin, Captain Ferrier? Yes; he would know.'

'I did not tell you, Mr. Percival,' she said, blushing, 'I am engaged to be married to my cousin.'

'Poor Tom!' The intelligence fell upon him so suddenly that he was fain to put his thoughts into words.

She bent her head, and did not reply for a moment. Then she said, softly,

'Tom was always my brother.'

Percival rose.

'You will, then,' he said coldly, 'consult Captain Ferrier how best to save this good man—your guardian—and your father's friend—from ruin. I knew that I had only to lay the matter before you. Thank you for your attention.'

He touched her fingers, and left her.

Why had her old friend the Professor treated her in such a manner? What had she done? Alas! she understood, too well. Poor Tom!

As Percival left the house, he met the accepted lover, and saluted him, but without the usual smile of recognition. Guy was in a vile temper that morning ; he wanted an answer from Violet, and he was afraid to call upon her again ; he was afraid that she might find out his engagement, which was already in the papers ; he would have kept away from his *fiancée* altogether but for Maude, who made him go.

His temper got the better of him when he saw a man—one of the many men—whom he hated, actually leaving the house.

'You, sir,' he cried. 'You—what is your name?'

'My name is Percival, as you know very well, Captain Ferrier.'

'What are you doing in this house?'

'You had better,' said the other, 'ask Miss Ferrier.'

'I forbid you the house,' said Guy. 'I will not allow you to call upon Miss Ferrier.'

'Have you anything more to say?' For Virginie's sake Percival kept his temper down. Yet it was hard not to 'go' for that ill-conditioned brute. Poor Virginie!

'No, sir. I have nothing more to say. You have my commands.'

'Then, Captain Ferrier, as I am not in your Company, let me tell you that I do not take commands from you. Good morning.'

Guy found his cousin in tears. He took no notice of her agitation, being still in a towering rage.

'Virginie,' he said, 'that man is never to come to the house again. You must never speak to him if you meet him; you are not to know him. Do you hear?'

'What man?'

'The man who has just been here. Percival is his confounded name.'

'My old friend? Why not?'

'Because I wish it.'

'I have just heard very bad news,' she said, passing over this thing, though she wondered greatly. Then she told her news.

'Going to be bankrupt, is he?' asked Guy. 'That seems a pity, But it isn't your fault.'

'He shall not be bankrupt,' said Virginie, firmly, 'if I can help it. Bankrupt! when I have all those thousands, doing no one good. Why, if it cost me all my fortune, he should not be bankrupt.'

He laughed in contempt.

'Give up your whole fortune? Oh! come, Virginie, don't be ridiculous. Your money is not to be made ducks and drakes of in that fashion. These people must help themselves out of the mess.'

'But I *must* save my dear old guardian, Guy, I must. Do you not understand? He was my father's closest friend; his wife is my mother's cousin; he has been everything to me. Cannot you see that I *must* go to their help?'

'No, I can't. Your fortune belongs to yourself—and to your husband.'

'I have no husband—yet.' She looked dangerous; but Guy's temper made him careless of what he said. Of course he meant that her fortune was already promised to himself.

'I shall not allow you to fool your money away,' he went on, in his blundering, stupid, selfish way.

Her colour mounted to her cheek. Was this a way for a girl to be addressed by a lover?

'I do not understand you, this morning, Guy. First you forbid me to keep up the acquaintance of a gentleman for whom I have the greatest regard; next, you refuse to recognise my dearest obligations. As for asking your permission——but you had better leave me.'

It was his cursed temper, he said to Maude, afterwards. What business had the girl to talk of giving away her fortune—his money?

He obeyed; but, still being wrathful, he fired a parting shot.

'I am sorry,' he said, 'that you object to common sense. Perhaps, to-morrow, Virginie, you will have recovered your reason.'

He came away, leaving her bewildered. Was this her gallant and chivalrous lover? Was it possible for a man of such exalted principle and noble feeling to disapprove of the help she wanted to give her oldest and truest friends? Could she have been deceived?

It was the first part of this business which Mr. Percival was still turning over in his mind.

Poor Tom! Poor Virginie!

That was the burden of his song. The coming failure was nothing compared with this loss and throwing away and waste of love. Even the break up of Mon Désir estate was but a small thing compared with the marriage of this sweet and precious girl with a man so churlish, so morose, and so selfish.

'Elsie,' he said, 'prate to me no more of Violet Lovelace. I have had to do with worse troubles than hers.'

'Not troubles of your own?' The girl was quick to think for him.

'No, not my own. I told you that the spell was removed from the Enchanted Island when Virginie came away.'

'Yes.'

'The palace of jasper and malachite and white marble became a simple bungalow, with elephant creeper and honeysuckle climbing round it, and a compound planted with roses and mignonette and pretty things about it. Now the bungalow itself is to be destroyed and its occupants turned out.'

'Oh!'

'One of them is an old man. And it will probably kill him. One is a young man, and his chances are ruined.'

'Oh! your poor friends.'

'And Virginie'—— He paused.

'Virginie?'

'A dreadful dragon has got hold of Virginie. He will first devour and destroy all that she possesses, and after that he will rend her to pieces. Poor Tom!'

'Oh! is it true?'

'It wouldn't help me much, now, if I had dropped Tom over the ravine. Yet I wish I had, because it would have saved him this dreadful blow. Going suddenly over the ravine would have hurt less and killed him sooner. I believe it is quite a pleasant way to get rid of life, if it is done unexpectedly. But in these cases, Elsie, everything depends upon the skill of the operator. A clumsy practitioner, now, might make the operation really a painful one. Poor Tom! I really wish I had.'

CHAPTER IX.

SHALL I TELL HER?

'It is very good of you to come, Mr. Percival,' said Violet, when he presented himself. 'Elsie told you what I want.'

'She said you want a wise man, Miss Lovelace; which made it the more remarkable for you to consult me.'

'Elsie says you are wise; and perhaps, though you may not be wise in your own affairs'—she said this without meaning any reflection on the undoubted shabbiness of the hat—'you may be in other people's. If you will listen to me—if you have the time.'

'At present, Miss Lovelace, I have all the time there is, or nearly all. I will listen like one end of a telephone, if I can be of any use to so charming an actress.'

'Elsie said you were a good fellow,' said Violet. 'Let us be friends, Mr. Percival. You must call me Violet. It isn't my real name, so it doesn't matter. Besides, lots of men call me Violet who never want to help me at all.'

'Very well, Violet—you do me very great honour—and if I can be of the least service——'

'Think it is for Elsie's sake,' she interposed, anxious to check the first shadow of a flirtation. 'And then give your attention to an unfortunate married person, whose husband ought to be put in the pillory, and kept there till there wasn't a rotten egg or a bad potato left.'

'For Elsie's sake, then,' he replied, laughing.

Then the actress told her story, anonymously.

'May I call your husband names?' asked Percival.

'If you please.'

'He wants you to stand by and see yourself and your child insulted, while he ignores your existence and marries again; he wants you to be the accomplice in a crime in which you lose all and he gains everything; he wants you to accept his bare promise to acknowledge the boy as soon as he is of age—when the *witnesses who could prove his identity with your husband will perhaps be dead*; and he threatens to follow, rob, and annoy you, to take the boy—to—— Good God! I cannot call him names. There are no names in the English language which I can find strong enough. But I know a little Hindustani, and I will swear at him for a few moments in that tongue.' He did so, which relieved his mind. 'But your course is quite clear. Put yourself into the hands of a lawyer, and have a separation properly drawn up. Is the man—I do not ask out of any impertinent curiosity—but is he a gentleman?'

'Certainly he is.'

'I don't mean—does he wear black cloth instead of corduroy. But is he a man of any position?'

'He is the heir to a Peerage.'

'In that case you are quite safe. There may be one or two bad hats among eldest sons; but there is not one, I am sure—there cannot be one—who would dare to take his wife's salary and deprive her of her son.'

'Not if he were ruined?'

'Not then; because, you see, the heir to a Peerage must—he must—pay some regard to honour. He may drink and gamble: he may do all kinds of bad things; but such a thing as your husband threatens you with he dares not do. No: if he were ten times ruined he could not do it.'

Violet breathed.

'This is a *very* bad man,' she said. 'I think he is the most selfish of all men that ever lived: and the basest. Boys take after their mothers, they say: else I should have no joy in my son for fear he should take after his father.'

'Get your deed of separation drawn up. You have, doubtless, valid reasons for desiring the separation; he would not wish for publicity:—you may rest in perfect safety.'

'But if I refuse my consent, all his family would back him up.'

'Oh! no. What are you thinking of? Do you believe it possible that the family of any English gentleman would back up their son in such abominable wickedness as this?'

Violet had been thinking of the Wicked Duke and the Virtuous Milliner of song and story and melodrama; and now began to suspect that perhaps these picturesque characters might be theatrical, and belong to a melodrama.

'I will tell you all, Mr. Percival, because I am at my wit's end and would do anything—even be an accomplice in bigamy—rather than let my boy's rights be lost. His father is the only son of a Lord: he is about eight-and-twenty; he is completely ruined by gaming; he has mortgaged his reverses—no, his reversions'——

'His reversionary interests'——

'For as much as they will bring; and he is in despair. And he has got hold of a girl with money. If he marries her all will be well, he says. If not, all will be ill. The girl's name I do not know. His name is the Honourable Guy Talbot Ferrier. And I am his —— Gracious, Mr. Percival, what is the matter?'

He sprang from his chair and began dancing round the room, because the wrath which seized him at that moment was too much to be endured.

'The villain! . . . the double-dyed villain! . . . . the scoundrel! I knew he was capable of anything from the very first . . . he looks it . . . there is rogue and traitor and liar and common cheat stamped upon his face. Oh! . . . oh! . . . oh!'

Violet looked at him in amazement which partook of amusement. Because she had never before had an opportunity of seeing genuine, unrestrained wrath freely manifested. It is, if you think of it, one of the rarest of things. Afterwards she 'rendered' this portion of the scene to Paul very faithfully, and they made a note of it for future use.

'Do you know him, then, Mr. Percival?'

He stopped in his wild career, in which he had broken two chair legs.

'Yes, I do know him,' he replied fiercely. 'What is more—I know the girl whom he wants to marry. But we shall stop that. Thank Heaven, we shall stop that!'

'Stop it by all means,' said Violet; 'but don't forget my boy's interests.'

'We will not. She is the sweetest girl, the kindest-hearted, prettiest, most noble, most perfect, most lovely of women.'

'But I thought you were in love with Elsie, Mr. Percival. That was why I asked you to help me; and now it seems as if you were in love with . . . no . . . no . . . she can't be my rival, because' . . . Here she stopped abruptly.

'Elsie! Elsie! oh! yes—Elsie. I am in love, first of all, with Virginie. Elsie is a good little thing; but—Virginie!'

'Good little things may have hearts of their own, Mr. Percival. Remember that.'

'As Beatrice was to Dante, as Laura was to Petrarch, so is Virginie to those who love her.' He was so deeply moved with indignation that he said these words in perfect earnestness and solemnity.

'What's the use of loving a woman if you can't marry her?' asked Violet.

Percival made no reply. The explanation and apology of a man's loves to a perfect stranger was a descent from melodrama to farce. There should always be a funny man in every piece, but Percival had no wish to play the part.

'How shall we act?' he asked. 'We must think of her as well as of yourself.'

'If you will tell me the girl's name, and where she lives, I will write, or go to see her, and tell her the truth at once. Do you think she is fond of him?'

'I do not know. Yes; the sooner the better

—not a day should be lost. I cannot think he would dare to marry her without some promise of silence from you. I wondered when I saw him first, last New-Year's Day, what the man had done to make him so morose and black of visage.'

'He had married me,' said Violet, 'and he couldn't get rid of me.'

'That ought not to make a man morose,' replied Percival, gallantly.

Violet laughed.

'If I had married you I think I should have gone dancing and singing,' he said; yet, with a little hesitation and half a blush, because, perhaps, she would not like this turn of the conversation. But she did.

'I don't mind compliments a bit,' she said. 'Lord! Everybody pays me compliments. I get them, with bouquets, sent to the stage door; and letters; and in poetry and in prose; and from all sorts of men—prince to potboy. Men are all alike; they fall in love with a woman made up for the stage with vaseline and rouge and powder; and they think she is a goddess; and they think they may "hope," as they call it. But don't get serious, or I must tell Elsie. So you think you would not have been so morose if you had been my husband. I don't think you would, and I wish to Heaven that you were my husband, or any other honest man, instead of the poor creature I have got. Well, . . .' she sighed heavily, 'let us have patience, and spoil his little plot.'

'You may do one of two things—you may tell his father or you may tell Virginie. One of these two things you must do. If you choose the first you can never again be threatened in this way. If the second, she will learn the truth in the most direct way.'

'I cannot tell Lord Ferrier,' said Violet. 'I promised him—my husband—that I would not obtrude myself upon any of his family. Nothing but the interests of the boy would make me break that promise. Let me go to Miss ——. What is her name?'

'Miss Ferrier—she is his second cousin. Perhaps that would be best. But go at once—to-day.'

He sat down and wrote a letter.

'Dear Virginie,—

'I have made a discovery of the highest importance to you. The lady who bears this note will tell you what it is. You may *entirely depend* upon the truth of what she says. I grieve to be the sender—not the cause—of such a tale as she has to tell you.

'Yours always and sincerely,
'PHILIP PERCIVAL.'

'There!' he said. 'The letter is plain and straightforward. You will tell her kindly, will you not?'

'I will tell her as kindly as I can,' said Violet. 'There cannot be much kindness in telling a girl that the man she—loves—perhaps—I loved him once, or thought I did—is such as my husband.'

'But you will not—oh! no—I am sure you feel for her. It is not her fault——'

'I will be very kind and gentle,' said Violet, softening. Then she laughed, and said, 'Shall I rehearse the scene to you? I can be the injured wife—see'—her face became pale, her eyes fixed, her arms dropped to her side, her form rigid—she was a woman in the first despair of a deadly blow. 'Or the raging woman whose lover has been snatched from her. So.' She threw herself back, and became a figure full of life, passion, and wrath, her left arm raised high above her head, her right hand quivering at her bosom. She was Medea. 'Or I will take it crying. See.' She sank upon her knees with a low wail, forced from her by her misery, and buried her despairing head in her hands. 'Or shall I triumph over her sorrow?'

'You are a wonderful actress. You can represent any passion, and any person. Represent for me, now, the real Violet Lovelace, the woman who has a heart——'

'No.' She took the letter and read it. 'That part is reserved for Miss Ferrier—if there is a woman with a heart at all. But I don't know—sometimes nothing is real but the boy—and Daddy. And the best part of him, poor old man! is his wig. You can trust me, Mr. Percival. I will be as kind as I can. You know that I have never been taught the gentle ways and soft words that ladies learn—I mean some ladies—not all. Because I have seen them fighting to get out after the performance, and struggling for good places at a sale and a picture show; and really I think that we behave much better on the stage.'

CHAPTER X.

WIFE AND FIANCÉE.

VIRGINIE had been engaged exactly a fortnight. It is not a long time, but an ardent lover may do a great deal in fourteen days to make himself known to his sweetheart, and to learn her thoughts and her way of looking upon things. The one thing which Guy did to reveal himself was to forbid her to receive the visits of one old friend, and to fly into a rage when she spoke of saving another old friend from ruin. What did this mean? She was astonished and perplexed. Perhaps when Guy came again he would explain how she had misled him. Certainly he would not, he could not, object to her trying to help her guardian. She met Maude in the evening, but said nothing about her trouble. No doubt Guy would come in the morning and explain, and all would be well.

He did not come; he had, in fact, though he knew it not, seen Virginie for the last time; he stayed in his own rooms, morose and savage. Why did Violet make no sign? What did she mean? And if the other girl was going to give away her money—*his* money—it might just as well be broken off at once. Better, in fact, let the smash come.

Virginie waited for him all the morning. As he did not come, she thought of writing to him. Hitherto, no letters had passed between them; none of the little notes meaning nothing, except always, 'Je t'aime—je t'aime,' which are so common among some lovers. Not one note, not one word of endearment—truly a frigid lover and a disappointing engagement. On the other hand, plenty of notes from Lord Ferrier, who was much more in love with her than his son, and was, in fact, the only one of the four concerned who was entirely happy over the engagement. She could not write. He must either come and make rough things smooth, in person, or he must write; she could not.

Early in the afternoon she received a letter, and was informed that the lady who brought it was waiting to see Miss Ferrier. It was Percival's letter. What misfortune could it be? She thought of her guardian, and assumed that it was connected with him. Had the blow really fallen, and so suddenly? But no mail could have come in since yesterday, when her own letters reached her, and spoke about nothing unusual.

It was a young lady, apparently about five-

and-twenty, dressed in some plain dark costume. She wore rather a thick veil, for the time of year.

'Oh!' cried Virginie, 'you have come from Mr. Percival to tell me something. What has happened? Is it my guardian?'

'No, Miss Ferrier; it is not your guardian.'

'Will you, please, tell me what it is?'

Violet looked at her for a few moments in silence. She was certainly a very pretty girl, and not the least in her own style.

'Yes,' she said; 'I will tell you. But it is rather a long story.'

'Tell me first whom it concerns.'

'It concerns—yourself.'

'Some misfortune has happened to myself! What can that be?'

'I did not say misfortune. What I am going to tell you will avert the worst misfortune which could happen to any woman.'

'You are mysterious. May I ask your name?'

'I am called, on the stage, Violet Lovelace. I am an actress by profession. You may have seen me at the theatre.'

'Yes, indeed I have,' said Virginie. 'I have seen you several times. But what story can you have that concerns myself?'

'I have a very sad story, and one which concerns you very closely. Tell me, first—do not, pray do not, think me impertinent—do you love Guy Ferrier?'

'I am engaged to him.'

'Yet . . . still : . . do you love him?'

'I cannot answer that question. I ought not to answer it. I do not know how to answer it.'

'You do not know. I am glad of it. Because you would have answered it easily—if . . . You are his cousin, are you not?'

'Yes; I am his cousin.'

'I will ask you no more questions, Miss Ferrier. I will tell you my story.'

Violet is a very clever woman. If she had not been an actress she might have been a great dramatist or a great novelist. She told her own story in the most effective way possible. She did not begin with 'There was once a girl.' She said. 'I was a poor girl, a street child, a gutter child, who played in a court and danced to a barrel organ.'

She struck at once the note of poverty, ignorance, belief in the promises of a gentleman. She told how, after years of training, she came out in small parts at a London house; how a gentleman was introduced to her. 'Very few gentlemen were introduced to me then, because I was a very insignificant little person in those days. This one was young—not more than one or two and twenty—he was one of those young men who must always have what they desire, without waiting for it, and at whatever cost; and he fell in love with me; he fell so much in love that he must needs marry me at once. I was so silly that I thought it a splendid thing to marry a gentleman, and we were married, in a church and before witnesses. He was a handsome man, and, of course, I thought he would be as good as he was handsome; and I was a pretty girl, and he thought he would always love me as much he did then.' So far it was a tale of love; a tale of the Prince and the Beggar Girl.

Then her note changed. The second act began with a small lodging, a husband who repented of his act a week after he had done it, and was already weary of his wife; and then a baby; and cruel words, with neglect, desertion, and reproaches. And that act closed with the flight of the mother and her child.

Virginie sat listening in wonder. Such a tale, so told, she had never heard or looked to hear. Why, in the gestures, the voice, the look of the actress she saw scene after scene of the sad story as if it was being played by all the actors in it, before her eyes. More than this, out of the words and the voice she constructed the despicable hero of the piece, and she shuddered because she was made, in spite of herself, to think of Guy. As the actress stood when she put hard and cruel words into her husband's mouth, as she held her head, so he stood, so he held his head. But she put the thought behind her. And was it not his very voice that spoke those words?

Then came the Third Act. But as Virginie listened her heart grew cold, because it seemed to her as if she heard the very footsteps of Guy, drawing nearer and nearer, as if she heard his voice, heard his words. The air was heavy with the presence of her lover.

'Who . . . who . . . is the man?' she cried.

Before her stood nothing but the thin figure of a woman; but beside the woman, there seemed to be the ghost of her own lover—no more noble, no more the perfect knight, but downcast, with hanging head, uttering shameful words, a craven, a coward, and a liar.

'Who is the man?' she cried, passionately.

Violet went on with her drama, heedless of the question.

Then Virginie saw how this ghost, this wretched creature, maddened with debts, sent to the woman he had married, and proposed that they should both go on for the future as if there had been no marriage: how she refused the offer, because the boy should never be ashamed of his mother: how then he asked her—but she refused again—to make no sign if he acted as though he were not already married, because by marrying a certain girl with a large fortune he could put his difficulties straight, and in sixteen years' time, but not till then, when the boy was of age, he would acknowledge him to be his lawful heir.

She stopped: her story was told.

Then she took Virginie by both hands, and said, while natural tears of pity rose to her eyes,

'Poor child! I hope you do not love him; because this man, this villain, my husband, is none other than Guy Ferrier.'

'I knew it, from the beginning,' said Virginie, quickly. 'I saw it must be he. I knew his voice, and his gestures. Let me think a little. I do not know what to say, or what to think.'

'Certainly,' thought Violet, 'this is not the way in which a lovesick maid would receive the news. She does not love him.'

'I must ask him,' said Virginie, presently, 'if your story is true. But Mr. Percival says that what you say is true'——

Then they were silent again.

'Shall I show you his son?' asked Violet. 'The boy is not like his father.'

'Oh! No . . . no . . . no. I want to see nothing and no one belonging to him.'

Virginie went to the open window. Outside there were the carriages and the people, and there was the clear bright sunshine of the sweet June day. But she took no note of these things. Presently she returned to the table by which Violet was sitting.

'I know why you asked me if I love him. Tell me—you—do you love him?'

'No.'

'Did you ever love him?'

'I do not know. I was young and foolish. No gentleman had ever spoken of love to me before. I thought I did. Heaven knows, I might have loved him had he chosen. Now I cannot even pity him.'

'Do you think I might have loved him, too—in time?'

'I do not know.'

'To live with him for fifteen years. To be his wife for all that time; then—suddenly—to learn the dreadful truth. Oh! Guy . . . Guy . . . how *can* men be so wicked?'

This was the part of the wrong which struck her imagination; the fifteen years of honour and happiness, with the man whom she had learned to love, followed by the rude discovery of his frightful treachery and her own position.

'You look good,' said Virginie, piteously. 'Can you tell me what I should do—I mean—do first? For, of course, I must never see him again. I never could. But there are other people. Lord Ferrier loves me, and will be made unhappy;

Maude, his sister, loves me; Mrs. Hallowes will want to know why I have broken the engagement; my guardian will want to know. What am I to say to all of them?'

'I do not know what ladies do, or how they should act. If I were you, I would say nothing. Say that Guy has broken the engagement. Refer them to him for reasons.'

'But—you, will you not, go to Lord Ferrier yourself and tell him?'

'No. I promised him long ago, when he cursed the day that he married me, that I would not be the one to tell the story to his father. I have kept that promise, and I will keep it still, unless I have to break it—for the sake of the boy.'

'Shall I leave you?' Violet asked presently; 'I think I can do nothing more for you. Can you forgive me?'

'Forgive you?' said Virginie. 'Why, but for you, I might have married him.'

This was a strange speech from a girl who had just been torn from her lover. But it might be taken in more senses than one.

Violet went away.

Left alone, Virginie went over the whole story again, trying to understand it thoroughly. It was, alas! too easy to understand. In place of the perfect gentleman, the Knight without Reproach, the pure Sir Galahad, there stood a Thing with contorted features, hideous, deceitful, a wild beast. Poor Maude! Poor Lord Ferrier! Who was to tell them?

She sat down quickly, and wrote a note.

'I have received a visit from Violet Lovelace, the actress. She has told me a story about you and your marriage with her. If that story is true, do not answer this letter. If it is not true, come and see me. Virginie.'

She sent this letter by a special messenger. If Captain Ferrier was in his chambers he was to wait for an answer. If he was not, the man then was to go to his club and there wait for an answer. He was not to return until he had put the letter into Captain Ferrier's own hands. And, meantime, she was at home to no one.

It was nearly seven o'clock when the man returned.

He had given the letter. Captain Ferrier read it, tore it up into a great many fragments, and said, 'Tell Miss Ferrier that there is no answer at all.'

It was all true, then.

'Where is your ring, my dear?' asked Mrs. Hallowes. 'It is bad luck not to wear an engaged ring.'

'My engagement is broken off,' said Virginie.

'Your engagement broken off? My dearest child, what is the meaning of this?'

'Captain Ferrier has broken it off, dear Mrs. Hallowes. Will you ask him—not me—the reason why? I have sent him back his presents, and there is an end.'

'An end? Virginie, are you dreaming? Yesterday he was with you half the morning—was the engagement broken then?'

'No; not then, it has been broken to-day. You will ask him why, not me.'

'Good Heavens!' said Mrs. Hallowes.

'We are going out to-night,' said Virginie. 'I do not feel very much inclined for dancing, but we will go. And you will tell everybody, please, that the engagement is broken off. I wish particularly that this should be known at once.'

'But—my dear——'

'It is quite true,' Virginie repeated. 'It is broken off so hopelessly that it can never . . . never . . . never be renewed. It is not a quarrel, nor a misunderstanding. It is an *impossible* thing for me to marry him.'

'Have you told Maude?'

'I have written both to her and to Lord Ferrier, telling them that the engagement is broken. For their sake, I am very, very sorry. For my own——'

'For your own, dear?'

'For my own, I can never be sufficiently grateful and happy.'

Mrs. Hallowes said no more. It was clearly no mere lovers' quarrel. Besides, Captain Ferrier was not in love with Virginie, as she had the sharpness to have perceived very clearly from the beginning. The man wanted her fortune, and she had learned something of his character. He had no friends, although he knew many men; and he was a gambler. Could Virginie have learned that he was a gambler? That would hardly explain her statement that he himself had broken off the engagement. Could she have found out entanglements of another kind? But since he, and not she, had broken the engagement, that could scarcely be.

She was fairly puzzled.

Their little dinner that evening, usually so full of cheerfulness, was silent and dull. Presently they went to some party, where Virginie danced more than was usual with her. Mrs. Hallowes, obedient to instructions, whispered the news, which was carried round; so that by the next morning there was not a single person interested in the career of the Honourable Guy Ferrier who did not know that his brilliant match was broken off. Virginie's letters to Lord Ferrier and to Maude were nearly alike. To the former she said, 'Dear Lord Ferrier,—Because you wished it, and because you have been so kind to me—kinder than I could ever have looked for or hoped—I am very sorry that Guy has broken off our engagement. He will, perhaps, tell you why,—Your grateful and affectionate cousin,

'Virginie.'

And to Maude she wrote:—

'My dear Maude,—Guy has broken the engagement. He will, if he pleases, tell you why; but do not ask me. For your sake and your father's sake I am very sorry that it was ever entered upon. I will write to my guardian by the next mail. Meantime, please understand that it is *impossible* for us to renew the promise. I mean impossible in the literal sense of the word. It is not matter of sentiment at all. Impossible. Thank you most sincerely for your kindness and your friendship.—Yours affectionately,

'Virginie.'

They received these letters sitting together after dinner. Lord Ferrier had been talking of Virginie—of the pleasant times they would have when she would be with them for good; making plans for their residence altogether; Guy settling down to a country gentleman. He talked constantly of Virginie; he longed for her to be married, so as to be at his side every day. While they were thus discoursing these letters came.

Lord Ferrier dropped the note in consternation.

'What does it mean, Maude? What does it mean?'

'It is some new folly of Guy's—some madness; I do not know what it means.' She sprang to her feet in a kind of despair. 'Oh! Guy . . . Guy! Then all is useless.'

'What does it mean, Maude?'

'I do not know, sir. Patience a little. We shall know—too soon—whenever the news reaches us; and too much, whatever the reason may be.'

CHAPTER XI.

BROKEN OFF.

VIRGINIE would see Maude ; but she refused to give any explanations.

'But, my dear, it is inexplicable. One day you are lovers, and the next you are strangers—and no reasons.'

'There is a very good reason indeed,' said Virginie. 'But yet I cannot tell it you.'

'You say that Guy broke it off. Why? It was his '—she was going to say 'his interest' but she refrained—'it was his dearest wish——'

Virginie smiled. 'No,' she said, 'it was never his wish at all. Do not think that any longer. He may have told you so ; but it was not true. He never wished to marry me : he never loved me. For that matter, he hardly took the trouble to pretend.'

'Oh! Virginie, is it, after all, only a lovers' quarrel?' It seemed, for the moment, as if she might be only piqued or out of temper.

'No : it is far worse than that. It is as I told you, an impossible thing for me ever to see him again. Ask him yourself.'

Maude went to her brother's chambers. He was out: he had left no message: she went to his club, he had not been there at all: then she went home and wrote to him.

'Virginie will tell me nothing. What have you done, Guy? What have you said?'

He answered by letter and briefly.

'Since Virginie will tell you nothing, I do not see why I should: the thing is broken off; it can never be taken up again. I suppose there will be a smash in a day or two. Perhaps you had better tell my father everything.'

Lord Ferrier found no pleasure that day in his studio, though the day was fine and the light good. He was painting a picture for Virginie; he was going to throw into it his very best work; it was to be a picture which even jealous Royal Academicians should not dare to refuse. Yet, if it could not be given to her, what was the use of going on with it? He, too, sought his son, but to no purpose, because Captain Ferrier was neither at his chambers nor his club. Then Lord Ferrier took luncheon at his own club, sat uneasily in the library over the magazines for an hour or two, reading, but remembering nothing. Then he thought he would try and see Virginie, and ask her about it himself.

'Virginie,' he said, sadly, taking her hand, 'tell me what it means. Am I not, in very truth, to call you daughter?'

'No,' she replied, 'I cannot become your daughter. But you must ask Guy to tell you the reason. He knows that it is impossible I should marry him; he has known it all along. Oh! why—why—did he ever try to persuade himself . . . it is incredible!'

'If you cannot tell me, my dear child,' said Lord Ferrier, 'I will not insist. It only remains for me to say how truly and deeply grieved I am at this blow.'

'Oh! you have always been so kind to me, so very kind'—for the first time the girl began to cry about her broken engagement—'but I feel as if I were doing some dreadful ingratitude. Believe me, it is not my fault; indeed, indeed, it is not.'

'I am sure it is not. The fault is wholly Guy's. Yet I lose a daughter; and it is very hard.'

He took her in his arms and kissed her. Then he left her, and went home and sat in his study, wondering by what sad fate the fruits and flowers which had promised to grace his old age were turning to dust and ashes. The older a man gets the greater need for him to have always something before him, something full of light, and sunshine, and warmth. Virginie was to be the source of light, and joy, and warmth to the old man. Now she was to go. This was a dreadful thing to think of. He looked very old and bowed when Maude stole into the room, and sat before him, her cheek upon her hand, and sorrow and shame written on her face.

'You bring no comfort, Maude,' said her father. 'Poor child! It is hard for you as well as for me.'

'No, sir; no comfort, but—more trouble.'

'Go on, my dear. Let me face the trouble—all the trouble that is in store for us. What fresh trouble?'

'It is no new trouble to me, sir. The knowledge of it has been my constant companion for long years. I have done my best to keep it from you; but now it can be kept no longer.'

'What is it, Maude? What is this burden that I am not to share?'

'It is concerned with Guy. My dear father'—she threw herself at his feet in tears of pity and of shame—'do you know the manner of man that your son is?'

'What is he, Maude?'

'He says I am to tell you all; well—I will take him at his word. I will hide nothing from you. He is a hopeless gambler; he has lost year after year all the money he could get from you, all he could get from me; he has paid none of his tradesmen during all these years; he has raised all the money that could be raised by . . . by . . . the ways in which such money is raised. Do you understand all that I mean?'

'I believe I understand it all, Maude. What more?' His hand, which he laid upon her head, trembled, though his voice was firm.

'He has come to the end of everything. Unless he can raise within a few days some fifteen thousand pounds for immediate wants, including debts of honour, he will be made a bankrupt—and worse.'

'He wants fifteen thousand pounds for immediate necessities.' Lord Ferrier repeated the words slowly. 'How much more will he want? What is the amount that he must raise?'

'I do not know.'

'Is there anything more to learn, Maude?'

'No; I have told you all. Except the amount of his debts.'

'Is this the reason why Virginie will not marry him?'

'I suppose so. I know no other reason. I am glad that the engagement is broken. It was my doing. I pressed Guy to clear himself by this rich marriage. I thought that we might save you from knowing anything. Yet I have had no happy moment since, for thinking of the wretched fate I had prepared for that poor girl.'

'Thank you, Maude.' Her father spoke quietly, as if unmoved, as if it was a thing demanding attention, but not disaster.

'Leave me now. I must think over what I ought to do.'

He sat thinking all the summer afternoon. He was never, himself, an ambitious man, but the Ferriers, from father to son, continually looked for the advent of that Ferrier who was going to lead his country to victory and triumph. He thought sadly of the hopes he had formed about his only son, the bright and beautiful boy who was going to be the greatest Ferrier of the line. These hopes had long since been dim, but they had never been altogether quenched; there was no reason why his son should not leave the Army and enter upon a political career, though as yet he had shown no ambition. He had no tastes: this was a thing which his father had long lamented, but never understood till now. For when the passion for play seizes upon a man it leaves no room for tastes of any kind. You cannot possibly serve God and Mammon. And of all men in the world the player spends most time and most thought over Mammon. He openly worships him. Now, even a buyer and seller of stocks has his Sundays.

As he pondered what would be best to do, a thought grew gradually in his brain, slowly taking shape, like a spectre, that there was only one thing left to do. If all the money was raised that could be raised—of course this meant—on the reversionary interests; if there was no other way—there was still the last resource; he could, with his son's consent, bar the entail and sell everything—even The Towers. And so an end of all!

He took some action; he wrote to his son, saying coldly that he had learned from Maude some of his difficulties. He ordered him to go at once to the family lawyers and draw up a complete statement of all his liabilities of every kind: and he added that until this were done, and some order taken with his affairs, Guy need not present himself.

That night Guy made his last appearance at the Green Grass Club, where he generally found the Baccarat he loved so well.

Serious play generally begins about eleven, though there is a little irregular practice—a little duelling, at écarté—before then. It is about midnight that the members drop in from their various haunts, and take their places one after the other. Some of them were little more than mere boys, though their conversation was 'grown-up,' and their knowledge of life—that is, some form of life—was precocious. Guy was one of the older men; he was so very old that he did not talk their slang. This is, indeed, a kind of tongue, like the purest Parisian of society, which changes every season. Besides, what to the young fellows fired with champagne, and inexperienced in arithmetic, was pure fun and merriment, was to Ferrier and some like him sober and serious business. What were only couters and ponies and monkeys to the lads, mere abstract sums of money, which they might lose or win without any difference, as they fondly thought, to themselves, were to the older men the means of satisfying ravenous creditors, meeting bills, and taking up promissory notes. The lads laughed and chattered about Regie and Freddy and Nelly and Connie and, generally, Jack and Jill; and told stories, and drank more champagne, and smoked cigarettes, and told more stories, and drank still more champagne; while the other hands kept cool, and watched the chances.

Guy was at first in bad luck. Before midnight he lost three hundred pounds. Then he began to win again, and won all back, and a hundred and fifty more. This was three o'clock. He thought he had won enough, and would go home.

Now, there is an institution at the Green Grass Club—a very useful little institution to young men who desire to be swiftly and suddenly stripped. It consists of a buffet, where one can find light refreshments, with champagne, or brandy-and-soda. Guy was a little exhausted with the excitement of the game. He drank the greater part of a whole bottle.

Then one of the boys began talking to him.

'Let us go back,' said this youth. 'It's my day out; and I've lost a thou. But you're in luck, old chappie; you are not going to desert your luck.'

He went back; it was as if a rope dragged him to the table; he sat down and went on with the play.

They left off at seven. The sun had been up for four hours; the morning was bright and hot; there were lots of people already in the streets. And Guy had lost fifteen hundred pounds.

He walked home to his chambers in a kind of dream.

There were letters on the table—from Maude, she had told her father all; from his father—he knew all, and ordered him to make out his list; from certain gentlemen of the money-lending and bill-discounting business, their language was forcible rather than kind; from tradesmen; from 'friends,' who held his I.O.U.s. The smash had come. Well; it had been coming a long time. It had been deferred by his engagement; but already everybody knew that it was off.

'As it has come,' said Guy, 'I shall go to bed. Curious; I wonder what will happen—— What is this?'

It was only a little packet—with a ring and a bracelet—trifles which he had given Virginie.

He laughed as he put them into his pocket.

'Marrying would have been a deadly bore,' he said. 'I wonder how she took it. Nasty thing facing Violet, if she let herself rip. But perhaps she put her case quietly. One never knows what they will do. Pity, too, for some reasons, that it didn't come off.'

He had had his last fling in that paradise of flinging youth, London. Paris has its points. New York has its corners. But for red-hot continued flinging there is, perhaps, no capital in the world like London. Now, as the first rule among the joyous companies is that he who flings must pay, it may be very well understood that Guy Ferrier was seen no more at his club or among any of his former associates. Nor do they at this moment know what has become of him!

CHAPTER XII.

POOR TOM!

The Smash was quite as complete as any that has ever been enjoyed by Prodigal Son. The thing is generally very much dreaded before it comes; yet it has its enjoyable points while it lasts. Nobody is so important *during the conduct of his case* as the bankrupt. It is afterwards, when the eyes of the world are no longer upon him, that the flatness sets in. Guy Ferrier felt, on the whole, happier when the crisis had arrived, though he could no longer go to his clubs, and though he had to spend a part of each day with lawyers, making out a list of liabilities which showed a really sublime contempt for the rules of addition, multiplication, and compound interest. Yet no man can afford to disregard science, and the end of such as do is certain.

It was, indeed, a noble list, regarded only as what a young man with a small allowance and expectations of a moderate kind can achieve in ten years. The contemplation of it raised a kind of rapture in the minds of those who read it. One felt proud of one's country, since it can produce such heroes in prodigality; and one marvelled at the man who could calmly see the whole of these thousands thrown headlong into the sea, getting nothing for them at all except the usual wage of the spendthrift, now about to be paid to him.

There is one way, and only one way, in which such a list in such a case can be met and discharged. It is a complicated way, and involves all kinds of other things; but in its broad principle it is simple. The way is for the heir and the tenant in possession to unite in barring the entail. When this is done, the family acres may be sold and the debts paid. It is a cruel way, because it destroys the House. The only way in which a family is kept together, and kept in the front place won by their ancestors, is by their lands and by their title. The latter cannot be sold, but the former can, and a penniless Lord may hide his head, and let the title die. The longer the line, the older the house, the more cruel a thing it is; for a man whose ambitions lay not in his own achievements but in those of the future, the thing was most dreadful.

Lord Ferrier accepted the position. His house was ruined. They could never again lift up their heads; his son was hopeless; they must save his honour somehow, if that could be done, and then find some quiet corner where, with his daughter, he could, sad and sorrowful, wait the end of his days.

'Go, Maude,' he said; 'go to take your last look at The Towers. I have no heart to go. When the papers are signed we shall be homeless. Perhaps we may somehow save enough from the wreck to live upon in some humble way.'

He knew, now, that his daughter's fortune was gone long before—thrown by his son as a sop to his creditors. They had no longer any secrets.

'Perhaps, Maude,' he said, with a smile; 'perhaps people may believe that I *can* paint, after all. We may sell the pictures.'

He uttered no reproaches, and made no complaints. Everything that he loved the most had come to ruin and wreck; he was going to lose all that he least looked to lose; through no fault of his. A hard and cruel case; somehow made worse by the knowledge that the man who had done the mischief was dead to repentance, and grieved only for himself.

Once, Maude asked him if he would see Guy. He made no reply, but he shuddered.

As for Guy, he made no sign of wishing to see anybody. He vanished. He was no more seen; he could not go to his club until his debts of honour were paid; he did not appear in any of his usual haunts. But he had some sense of honour left. He wrote to all and told them—what they knew already—that he was in a mess, and that his affairs were in his lawyer's hands. With that they were fain to be content. But many men, men of small means and vaulting ambition, who liked to play with those who could lose without caring much, and who looked for a prompt settlement of such claims, swore loudly and felt badly about Captain Ferrier.

I think that in those days he went o' nights to a certain obscure corner which exists in Soho. A good many curious and interesting things go on in that *quartier*. One hears stories from time to time; but it is difficult to get such an introduction to those houses as will allay suspicion, and gentlemen of the press would probably find themselves a hindrance rather than otherwise to the programme of the evening. At the house which Guy found out, a few Russians, Frenchmen, and other foreigners, chiefly of low degree, meet nightly and dally in a small way with the Goddess of Chance. Captain Ferrier was not particular about his company, so that he could get the excitement which is to some souls as necessary as ardent drink to others. He was happy if he came away the winner of a sovereign; he cursed his luck if he lost five shillings; he came the earliest and left the latest. He had given up his chambers, and lived at a small hotel, whose address was known only to his lawyers, and I think that he was happier in those days, living in this hole-and-corner way, punting for sixpences, than when he was plunging for hundreds and looking forward to the crisis. There was no champagne, but there was brandy-and-water.

In those days Percival plucked up heart of grace and called often upon Virginie; and they took counsel together. It was well on in July; the season was nearly over. Mrs. Hallowes, who went in sadness, having lost the most important persons on her visiting-list, was talking of the seaside. But Virginie had other thoughts in her head. She had not yet written to her mother and her guardian about the breaking of the engagement, which lasted but a short fortnight. She was thinking of another and a more excellent way of telling them.

It was concerning the more excellent way that Percival advised her. His arguments were forcible; and he spoke with plainness, and to no unwilling ears.

'Why stay here?' he asked her. 'Everything in London will remind you of—of—things you would gladly forget. You have endured a most cruel outrage at the hands of your own people. London will never be a happy place for you again.'

'No: never,' she replied. 'I can never think of London again except with pain. And I shall always remember Lord Ferrier's kindness.'

'Go out yourself,' he went on. 'The mail starts in a fortnight. Carry yourself the news of your freedom.'

She clasped her hands and her eyes sparkled.

'Then there is Tom,' the tempter added softly.

She blushed, but replied not.

'You do not know'—he pleaded the name of the absent Tom as warmly as if it were his own—'you cannot understand the perfect love with which he looks upon you. As for me and the rest of us, of course you know already that we love you just as much; but Tom of course comes first.'

'Oh! Mr. Percival,' said Virginie, with a rosy blush upon her cheek and a sweet smile in her eyes, 'you must not say such things to me.' Yet in Palmiste, such things had been said to her without meeting any objections.

'You will let me say such things, Virginie, because I am an old admirer, and you know that I do not presume any farther—while Tom is in the way, for Tom is different: he has watched you grow up beside him: his love is a part of his being: without you he is imperfect: you have been his companion from the time you could run about: you lisped his name almost the first of any: you have felt his affection about you and around you from the beginning. Virginie, is it possible that you could forget him ?'

'I have never forgotten him,' she said. 'How could I ever forget him ?'

'Yet you promised yourself to another.'

'Yes,' she said, humbly. 'But still I had not forgotten him. Can you not understand that he was always my brother ?'

'No, I cannot. Because, you see, he never was. People may call themselves brothers and sisters as much as they please, but they cannot create that relationship by any amount of calling. And if you loved him still, how could you——'

'I never loved my cousin at all,' said Virginie. 'Do not think worse of me than I deserve. I respected the man whose character Maude described; and they were very kind to me; and Lord Ferrier loved me; and it was what my father would have liked.'

'Then, now that you are free, now that you can do so, remember the only man who has the right to ask you for your hand.'

'You forget,' she said, gently, 'that things are not as they were. He has lost his faith in me. If he entertained——those feelings—once—they must have been destroyed——by myself. What respect can he have left for a girl who engaged herself—as I did—to such a man ? I cannot explain to him as I have explained to you.'

'He will know that you were deceived; he will say to himself that you——'

'Yes, he will make excuses for me; but can he ever think again—as he did before?'

'You would not ask that question if you knew and could understand what a man's love is. Virginie, it isn't a question of whether he thinks a little better or a little worse of you. All that is nothing. He *loves you.* Whatever you did, he would love you still. If you were to lose your beauty, he would love you still. If you were to go away and desert him for a hundred and fifty years, he would love you just as much when you came back. It isn't your beauty, or your grace, or your virtue, or your sweetness that he loves; it is yourself.'

'Has he told you all this?'

'No; he never talked about you.'

'How, then, do you know it?'

'Because, Virginie, I know the man; and because I judge him by myself. For I love you in just about the same way myself. You are my ideal woman, as you are his.'

The tears came into her eyes.

'What,' she asked, 'can a woman say or do that is worthy of this gift of love? You, who judge him by yourself, plead for him. Heaven knows it wants little pleading. You are so generous and so loyal to him that I cannot but do your will. It shall be as you desire.'

'Elsie,' he said in the evening—they were taking a stroll in the cool and leafy lanes of Battersea Park; it was nearly nine o'clock, and the sweet breath of summer was in the air. 'Elsie, I have had an agitated day.'

'Has your novel gone wrong, then?'

'No; there are one or two things even more important than the novel, though that will prove an Epoch-maker. What I was engaged upon was more important. You know, of course, Elsie, that I have always been in love with Virginie.'

'Yes, you have told me so a thousand times.'

'Have I really? So often? Yet it is a delightful subject to talk about—nothing more so. Being in love, then, and fully acquainted with the various phases of that interesting passion, I judge of Tom's feelings by my own.'

'Yes; that seems natural—if Tom does feel like you.'

'Of course he does. Now, consider the case. The young lady has suffered a great wrong; but things might have been much worse, because she might have been in love with the man who did the wrong. That, I am happy to say, is not the case. Not at all. She never really cared a straw about him; she has been insulted and outraged by the abominable wickedness of the creature, but her deeper feelings are untouched. Now, here is Tom's chance. Therefore I went there this morning to plead his cause.'

'Why not your own, since you love her so much?'

'You are a foolish child, Elsie. I told you that Tom must come first. And, after a great deal of beating about the bush, because one never quite knows in what light the thing is regarded by the person one is trying to persuade, I succeeded.'

'Yes, Elsie,' he continued triumphantly, 'Virginie will marry Tom. That is the news I have to tell you.'

'And you?'

'Why, I go on just the same. It has been a great happiness to me to love this sweet and beautiful woman. She will always remain to me the crown of womanhood. Perhaps I should be almost afraid of marrying her. Perhaps it is better to worship at a distance.'

'Perhaps,' said Elsie, a little jealously, 'you might find out that she is not altogether the goddess you think.'

'And what a dreadful thing that would be to discover!' said Percival. 'Now, if I marry a girl whom I know not to be a goddess, that would be better, wouldn't it?'

'I should think so,' said Elsie, blushing—she hardly knew why. But nobody was there to see it, so it didn't matter.

'Yes; much better. If, for instance, you and I were to marry.'

'Oh! Mr. Percival.'

'If you would not be jealous, and think that because I have loved Virginie I cannot find any love for you—but I thought you ought to know the whole truth.'

'Oh! Mr. Percival. What will Violet say?'

'You are a very dear and good little Elsie. We will go into that partnership, then. I've got no money; you've got no money. We will club our resources. And perhaps we needn't move our quarters. And now, my child, as there is nobody in this lane but ourselves, put up your lips and let me kiss you, and tell me that you won't be jealous. Petrarch always made them say that.'

CHAPTER XIII.

FAREWELL.

'I AM come,' said Maude, 'to ask you to forgive me, Virginie, before you go.'

She looked pale and worn; her thin cheek was thinner; her eyes more lustrous and more sorrowful. Sad stories in plenty have been written on the wreck of women's lives made by lover and by husband, but few of them which have been ruined by brother or by father; yet are these the more common. Maude Ferrier gave her brother everything: her thoughts, her work, her money, yet the end was—this.

'I am come to ask your forgiveness,' she repeated.

'Indeed,' said Virginie, 'I have nothing to forgive. You have always been most kind and good to me.'

'My goodness and kindness, Virginie, were assumed, for my brother's sake. I wanted him to marry you for the sake of your money. I wrote to him in Palmiste, urging him to pay court to you. I knew that he was in difficulties, and a gambler; I knew well that he would only be relieved for a time, and that he would throw away your fortune as he has thrown away his own. You were to be sacrificed to his selfish greed and prodigality, as well as I myself. It was a cruel and a wicked thing to plot.'

'But you told me——'

'All I told you was false. I said Guy was an honourable and a noble gentleman, as the Chief of our House has always been. It was false. He is cold and selfish, cruel and treacherous. This I knew. I was preparing you for the most cruel of disappointments. I deliberately laid my plans for you to become the wife of a reckless gamester. But, remember, my father knew nothing of it. Think ill of me, because I deserve it; but not of him, because he is the soul of honour. I have told him, now. When you found him out what where your thoughts of me?'

'But, Maude, I have not found him out. This is the first I have heard of his money difficulties or his gaming.'

'Why, then, was the engagement broken off. Is there worse to come?'

'There is worse to come, but I cannot tell you what it is.'

'To save him even for a year or two; to keep my father from knowing the reputation and character of his son—I think I would have sacrificed anyone. Yet—Virginie—I am glad that you are saved; and again I say—forgive me.'

'I forgive you, Maude. Whatever you did, was for your brother. I know already that he is not—the noble character I thought him. But what do you mean by ruin?'

'His liabilities are enormous; it is truly wonderful that he should have been trusted so greatly; to meet them my father has consented to the only course left open; he will cut off the entail and sell The Towers, and the estates, and the town house and all; and so there will be an end of us.'

'Sell The Towers? Sell the estates? Is it possible?'

'It is more than possible. The papers are ready, and will be signed to-morrow morning.'

'Oh! Maude, it must not be. Cannot some of my fortune——'

'Yours, Virginie? Ask yourself if we could take your money—when we have wronged you so cruelly.'

Virginie was silent. No; her own money could not be taken.

'To-morrow morning my father will see his son, but only for the signing of the papers, and then . . . then . . . oh! me . . . there will be no more pride for us, except in the past, and only poverty and shame for the future.'

'Maude!'

They wept together, and parted.

Now when, an hour later, Percival heard of this intention he fell into a great dubiety. For, first of all, he had no right to interfere; but, secondly, he had been taken into confidence by a person greatly interested in this barring of entail; and, thirdly, he thought that if the truth were made known to Lord Ferrier, he might reconsider a decision which would make his grandson a pauper. Finally, he decided on advising Violet to take the boy and go herself to her father-in-law.

'I promised,' said the actress, 'that I would keep his secret—and I have done so. Nobody knows—except that poor child with the pretty face. But for the sake of the boy I would break that promise, or any other that I have ever made.'

'It is for his sake that I advise you to break it. You ought never to have made such a promise at all.'

'What do you say, Daddy?'

'It looks well,' he said, . . . 'a lawyer's office—table with parchments——'

'It won't be parchment,' Percival objected. 'It will be paper.'

'Permit me, Mr. Percival, to know my

business. On the stage, wills and agreements and so forth must be on parchment—large, rustling parchment. I will proceed . . .'

He indicated by a sweep of his hand that the scene was set. 'At the table the lawyer, holding a pen—a large goose-quill—the introduction of steel pens has ruined the old goose-quill business —utterly destroyed it. Ah! what business have I seen in the good old farces got out of a simple quill pen! At the end of the table the prodigal, arms folded, brows knit—a prodigal at bay—most effective figure I assure you. Enter the father, bowed with years and grief, supported by his lovely daughter, who gazes reproachfully upon her brother.

'"Will your Lordship sign?"

'"Give me," he says, feebly, "give me the pen. Thus . . . thus . . . I sign away—for ever—the honour of the House."

'He dips the pen into the ink; he raises his hand. The door flies open—"Do not sign, my Lord!" Tableau! Very good indeed, Violet, my dear. It makes up for the loss of that other beautiful situation which you threw away. After all, it would not have taken place for sixteen years, and one does not know where I may be in sixteen years. Starring in the provinces, very likely.'

It did seem a very likely thing indeed, considering that he was already over eighty; but then Art knows nought of age.

'I think you ought to go, indeed,' said Percival. 'If you will allow me, I will go with you, unless Mr. Perigal would like to go.'

'I would rather go alone,' said Violet. 'And the boy shall go too.'

The papers were to be signed at noon. Guy was instructed to be in the study at that time; he was also informed that his father refused to speak to him, that he was to go away on the conclusion of the inquiry, and that he would be afterwards informed what provision, if any, would be made for him. The last clause was uncomfortable, because men who are the heirs to great names are not accustomed to consider even the possibility of a failure in the corn and wine, the butter and the oil, and the honey, which go to the daily bread. 'If any!'—but, of course, it could be only a figure of speech.

It was a little after eleven when Violet asked to see Lord Ferrier. She refused to send in her name, but said that she came on business of the utmost importance, and wished to see his Lordship immediately. She was taken to the study, where she waited, and wondered how her communication would be received.

Presently Lord Ferrier appeared. Not quite the man Violet expected—she somehow thought he would be a fierce, baronial kind of person, with the air of one who insists on all his rights; a French Seigneur of the good old time—though she knew little about Seigneurs; a melodramatic Lord, with large, white, fierce eyebrows. On the contrary, he seemed quite a mild and gentle old man, who bowed politely, and apologised for keeping her waiting, and asked what her business with him might be, and added that he was himself much engaged at the moment, and would be obliged if she would come to the point at once.

'Your business, my Lord,' said Violet, 'is connected with your son?'

'It is.'

'You are about to sign an agreement which will enable you to sell your property—all your property—for the purpose of paying off your son's debts.'

'I am; though I do not know how you have learned this.'

'Never mind that. I am thinking, my Lord, how I had best put into words the things that I have to tell you. I am here in hope of inducing you to reconsider that decision.'

Lord Ferrier rose.

'Madam,' he said, 'I cannot discuss this decision, or any other private concerns of mine, with a stranger.'

'Yet, you will listen to me, directly you know who I am. It is only since yesterday that I have understood the meaning of your Lordship's intention. Otherwise I should have been here long ago.'

'I am at a loss to know——'

'You shall know directly. I have been told that your Lordship is a . . . a . . . what they call . . . I am told . . . a tenant for life of the property which you hold.'

'That is so, certainly.'

'And that your son, when he succeeds, is also a tenant for life.'

'Yes.'

'So that if you agree between you to sell it you will be selling the property of your grandchildren.'

'If you put it in that way—yes. But I have no grandchildren.'

Violet had been holding the little boy by the hand; his back was turned to the window, so that his face was in shade. She now turned him round and pushed him gently forward.

'Does your Lordship,' she asked, 'see any likeness in that boy to any of your own family?'

It had been Violet's boast when she wrote to her husband that the boy was not like him. That was only true in part. The boy was exactly like what his father had been at his age.

‘It is Guy himself!’ cried Lord Ferrier. ‘The boy is like Guy at six. What does this mean?’

‘Your Lordship has one grandchild. That is what it means. I am your son’s wife.’

‘Is it possible?’

‘You do not, naturally, accept my statement. Wait. Your son will be here himself in a short time. Let him be witness. I was married to him six years ago, and separated from him five years ago. It was an unlucky day for me when I met your son.’

‘Is it possible?’

His eyes were fixed on the child.

‘I am an actress. I play under the name of Violet Lovelace.’

‘Is it possible?’

He kept repeating these words.

‘My Lord, have no doubt that I shall prove what I say. Will you make the future Lord Ferrier a pauper?’

‘The future Lord Ferrier. Yes . . . yes . . . The future Lord Ferrier. Then the house will have another chance. But, if the child is not a pauper, his father will be dishonoured.’

Violet laughed.

‘Is he not dishonoured already? Has he not engaged himself to a young lady, hoping that I should keep silence? Did he not come to me and threaten, if I did not keep silence, to take away the boy and rob me of my salary? What constitutes dishonour among gentlemen, if these things do not? I say nothing of the cruel treatment and bitter words that drove me from him as soon as my baby was born. I say nothing of being left to earn my bread as best I might, and keep the child as well. It all forms part of the man. If this is not dishonour, Heaven knows what it is.'

'Let me look at you,' he said.

She raised her veil, and looked up in his face.

'The eyes,' he said, 'are honest eyes. You have a good face.'

She blushed. She had not blushed for years; but now she blushed like an innocent, ignorant school-girl.

'My Lord,' she said, earnestly, 'my child has no cause to be ashamed of his mother, unless he is ashamed that she is an actress.'

'It is well said,' he replied, gravely.

Then he rang the bell, and desired that Miss Ferrier should be asked to come to him.

'Maude,' he said, simply, 'this young lady informs me that she is—your brother's wife—and that this is his son. If this be true—as I have very little doubt——'

'At least, sir, let us first prove it to be true.'

'Let us prove it to be true,' echoed Violet. She was gentle and soft with the man; but with this woman who looked at her with cold distrust she became herself cold and distrustful. She drew the child upon her lap. ‘I shall prove that you, Miss Ferrier, are my sister-in-law.’

‘Will you, then, take your proofs to the proper persons, our lawyers?’ asked Maude.

‘No; I will not. I will wait here till my husband comes, he will prove himself the truth of my statement. Your Lordship will understand that I am here for no other purpose than to defend my son's rights. Your nephew’—she addressed herself to Maude with some asperity of manner—‘may become an actor. I believe none of his predecessors have ever followed this profession.’

Maude sighed. She did not doubt the story. A foolish marriage was only one more episode in the history of her brother, and a most natural episode.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then Lord Ferrier spoke.

‘If it be as you say,’ he said, slowly, ‘I will respect the boy's rights at the expense of his father.’

Violet made no reply. Then there was silence again.

The clock struck twelve. And at the moment, true to the time appointed, the lawyer bearing the paper arrived; with him, Guy himself.

He started at the sight of Violet.

'You here?' he cried. 'You have broken your promise.'

'Who is this lady, sir?' asked Lord Ferrier.

He looked from one to the other. He remembered the witnesses to the marriage; further concealment was hopeless; besides, it was useless.

'She is my wife,' he said, 'and this, I suppose, is the boy.'

'It is the boy,' said Violet. 'I have the other proofs, but . . . is your Lordship satisfied?'

'I am satisfied,' Lord Ferrier replied.

'First, then, you will sign this paper'—Violet addressed her husband, not Lord Ferrier. 'You acknowledge that you married me under the assumed name of Richard Johnson. That is all. But I wish you to sign it in the presence of your father and your sister.'

'If that is all,' said Guy, carelessly, 'let us sign.'

He read the paper, signed it, and returned it to her, with a bow. 'I suppose,' he said, 'that we part again. Quite so. You have not kept your promise; but do not fear; I shall not interfere with you.'

'Give me, if you please,' said Lord Ferrier to the lawyer, 'the agreement which I was to sign. I have decided, sir,' he said to his son, 'not to execute this deed. I will not join you in barring the entail. The estates shall be kept—for your son. I think I have no more to say to you. Stay. You will learn in a few days what I can do for you. An allowance of some kind shall be made to you, on the condition that you leave England and do not return in my lifetime. As regards your creditors, I shall see what sum I can set aside every year, so long as I live, for their use. Go ; let me forget that ever I had a son.'

The young man turned and left the room without a word.

'Guy !' cried Maude, catching his hand, but he shook it off with an angry gesture. He had not even a single kind word of farewell for the woman who had given him all she had. She sank into her chair, and buried her face in her hands.

'My dear,' said Lord Ferrier, taking Violet's hand and raising it to his lips, 'you are my daughter-in-law. In this house you will be always welcome.'

'Thank you, my Lord. My secret shall still be kept. I will not take your name to the theatre, and I will go on working for myself. As for the boy, when he is older you shall decide about him. Boy, kiss your grandfather.'

She held up the child to be kissed.

'I will go, now. Do not cry for your brother,' she said to Maude. 'He is not worth a tear. I haven't cried about him for more than five years.'

But Maude made no sign, and Violet walked away, leading the boy with her.

So Guy passed away, and will be seen no more. Nor can one say what will be his end. Where cards and dice and roulette-tables are to be found he will make his home. That is quite certain. It is also certain that he will descend, slowly or rapidly, deeper and deeper, until the outward semblance of a gentleman is lost. As one thinks of him and his future, one remembers stories of Mexican hells and New Orleans gambling saloons, and of shots fired across a table, and a dead body thrown into the street. Or one remembers ghastly things that one has heard: how men have fallen among thieves and swindlers, and cast in their lot with them, and become leaders among them, owing to the rare possession of a well-bred manner. Or one thinks of the despair that falls upon a man when his last sou is lost, and the cold river is close by.

Soon or late, the end of such men is certain.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN AUSPICIOUS DAY.

The cold season in Palmiste Island somewhat resembles the summer in the Straits of Belleisle. That is to say, while the latter begins on August the 31st and ends on September the 1st, the former is said to begin on June the 30th and to end on July the 1st. It should be called the 'not-so-hot-as-usual' season. In the very height—or depth—of the season was Virginie married.

Her return to the island was announced by no letters: she arrived alone and unexpected. There were few passengers by the mail, and hardly anyone came on board when the quarantine boat had done its duty. Therefore Virginie, leaving her boxes and things to be forwarded by the trusty purser, landed by herself, and by herself drove to Mon Désir.

It was in the afternoon, about five of the clock, that she arrived at the dear old Avenue of Palms. All the way out she had been living over again the tumult and humiliation of the last weeks in England. When she landed in the old familiar place her London season vanished, and became like a dream of the past. The sunshine lay upon the everlasting hills, the fresh breeze of the afternoon fanned her cheek, the ragged old banana-trees waved a welcome to her with their torn and disreputable rags of leaves. On the wharves the dusky coolies shouted as they ran backwards and forwards with their odorous sacks of guano; the merchants and the brokers sat beneath the trees upon the Place; the drivers slept upon their boxes; the mules kicked and bit each other; once more she heard the old Creole patois; once more she felt herself a Creole, and, as the carriage took her beyond the town, the tears came to her eyes. What was England to her but a name and a glory? What was her pride of family worth any more to her? What had been the vague wonders in her mind before she saw the birthplace of her father? How was she changed? How little it all meant now. What were London drawing-rooms—what was the talk of London society—what were the false friendships and pretences of English life—what were the nights in crowded ball-rooms—to the sweet, pure air of the Palmiste table-land; the rustle and the light, the colour and the shadow of the waving canes, the wooded hill side, the bare, hot rocks; the breadth of sunshine, the deep ravines, the waterfalls, and mountain streams; even the ugly wooden huts, with their tin roofs, of the Chinamen—in her native land?

When the carriage reached the avenue, she stopped it, and, telling the man to follow very slowly, she went on before with parted lips and eager eyes, thinking of how she should find them all.

Oh! Look. In the verandah there sat, as they always had sat, side by side, her mother with Madame Kemyss. They were not reading—what real good comes by reading, when you think of it? Nor were they talking—you do not do any good at all, in general, by talking. Nor were they working—why should they work, when they had people to work for them? On a table between them lay a book or two, and some work, just to look at. They were sitting there as they sat every afternoon, quite still, silent, and happy, enjoying the sunshine as it sloped across the lawn and lay golden on the distant hills, feeling the joy of the cloudless sky, and the breath of the fragrant air, and the scent of the roses on the lawn. Why talk? Why argue? Why waste breath in trying to prove the unknowable, when these things can be enjoyed? Needless work, fuss, prattle, chatter, fierce argument, and strenuous logic are for temperate zones. To these ladies there was nothing wanting in their lives but the return of their Virginie. And she was close at hand, though they knew it not, looking at them through the branches of an acacia. The Squire was there, too. But one is ashamed to say that he was asleep. He had been of late so much troubled and afflicted about the estate and the hesitation of the Banks that he often fell asleep of an afternoon. Now he lay back in his long chair and slumbered peacefully.

In a corner of the verandah sat old Suzette, in her cotton frock and red turban, coiled up. In her hands was a piece of work; but she, too, was half asleep.

A sleepy, peaceful place. As Virginie looked, she thought of the danger hanging over them, and how this peace might be interrupted, this rest disturbed, and these dear old people sent adrift to find such shelter as they might. To be sure, where her mother lived, there would be Madame Kemyss—there, too, the Squire. But—Tom!

And she blushed, because, during all the voyage, Tom had never once been out of her thoughts. What would he say? What would he say?

Now, at this juncture, Tom himself came sauntering slowly down the avenue. He was dull because the house was dull, and its silence almost intolerable to him. And in these days he was always dejected, and found no joy in anything nor any brightness in the sunshine. And, behold! before him stood none other than——Virginie!

He took her in his arms, and, without a word of question or explanation—perhaps he read her eyes—he kissed her a thousand times, regardless of the driver who sat on his box and grinned approvingly.

'Oh! Tom,' she cried, 'do you love me still?'

Did he love her? Did the sun shine? Was the sky blue? Were the flowers growing under their feet? Did he love her still?

* * * * *

And there were present at the wedding his Excellency the Governor and her Ladyship, his illustrious consort; also the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Palmiste, with the young Padre, his Examining Chaplain—it took the pair of them to read the service—and the Bishopess, and the Bishoplings and the Colonial Secretary, and the Auditor-General and the Treasurer, and all the Heads of Departments—with their wives and daughters; also all the members of the Legislative Council, with their wives and their sons and their daughters, and their grandchildren; and the General in command of the Forces, and the Colonel and all the officers of the Regiment in garrison; and the Assistant Colonial Secretary—he who had taken the Padre for a morning walk—and other assistants in Departments; and all the

French and English merchants, and as many of the planters as were white—you mustn't mix colours in a tropical climate any more than in æsthetic zones; and among them the McAndrew and the McLoughlin. As for the Pink Boy, he was there, too. His friend the Squire was saved from ruin. His letter had been acted upon; and, after all, this was the sad and fatal result. Yet he bore up, and acted as best man, looking very pink and young and handsome.

They were married, naturally, at the English Cathedral, which was much fuller than was ever before known in the memory of man, except on St. John's Day, when the Masons go there to solemn service, and hear a sermon full of dark allusion to Masonic rites, and feel reassured about that Greater Excommunication hurled at them by my Lord the Bishop of the Older Branch, whose Palace stands not a hundred yards away. The organ pealed continuously, and the choir boys sang an anthem, and the service was presently under weigh, and the Pink Boy and all the bridesmaids were in tears.

After the service there was the most generous and noble banquet ever spread, with culinary effects romantically tropical, artistically suggestive of sugar planting, poetically, allegorically beautiful. His Right Reverence proposed the bride: his Excellency proposed Captain Kemyss: the

Assistant Colonial Secretary, himself a bachelor, proposed the bridesmaids, and the Pink Boy in reply wandered off to the bride and confessed his passion: and the McAndrew went to sleep in the middle of the feast: and the McLoughlin at the close had to be supported by a friend on either side.

They spent their honeymoon in a little shooting-box hidden in the heart of the woods, where they wandered every day hand in hand. Sometimes they sat beside a sparkling stream, upon some fallen trunk, and watched the flickering of the leaves in the sunlight, or the herds of deer browsing in a lonely glade, in silent happiness. Sometimes they gathered orchids and ferns. Sometimes Virginie would read to Tom, who never read anything for himself. Sometimes she told him of the great world she had seen for a little and left for ever. Once she told him the true story of her engagement, and honest Tom was fain to own that the wickedness of man may be very astonishing. He meant white man—because he knew the coloured varieties pretty well, and had gauged their moral possibilities. Sometimes they came upon little clearings inhabited by settlements of old maroons who had long since forgotten their rancour against the white man, and among whom there was now none living, unless some very old Patriarch, who remembered the lash and the labour. Then the fair white lady sat among them, and talked to the simple people.

A sweet and simple honeymoon; the prelude to a sweet and simple life. Perhaps Virginie will be happier with her garden and her flowers, her woods and hills, her sunshine and peace, than if she were the Lady of The Towers, even though her husband were the Bayard that Maude represented him to be.

Another wedding; it was so obscure that I do not know on what day it was held; but it was about the same as Virginie's. That of Mr. Percival and Elsie. Nobody was present except Daddy Perigal and Violet and the boy. They have, as they proposed, clubbed their resources. Elsie is to go on governessing, while her husband shapes that spoon. It will never, I think, be a very remarkable spoon; but there will be some neatness and freshness in the design, some taste, with conscientiousness in the execution; and the whole of the man's heart will be thrown into his work, so that, perhaps, there may presently happen to be found a few simple people who will look upon the spoon with a little admiration and a little sympathy.

THE
HUMBLING OF THE MEMBLINGS

THE HUMBLING OF THE MEMBLINGS.

It is now forty years since Josiah Membling, clock and watchmaker, retired from Gracechurch Street and the little shop, where he had done extremely well, to his native village in Essex. He was the son of a small farmer and the descendant of sturdy yeomen; the instincts of old family were strong in him; when, therefore, being a good way past sixty, he thought the time had come to sell the business and retire, he was encouraged by the fact that the Hall of his native village was for sale, with the park and grounds. He bought them; took his family into the country with him, and settled down, for the fifteen years of life which remained to him, not as a country gentleman exactly, for the good man had no idea of going into society, but as a mixture of retired tradesman and farmer. He farmed his own land, though he lost money by it: he found life dull after the stir of the city, and he continually yearned after the manufacture of watches and clocks, in which he was no mere seller of other men's work, but himself an ingenious and accomplished workman, who had duly served his seven years' apprenticeship, and was besides a mechanician by native genius.

During the latter years of his life the old man spent most of his time locked up in his own room. It was a very large room on the first floor, having two windows facing the south and four looking west; beside it was a small dressing-room which he occupied as a bedroom; and no one at all was ever allowed to enter the large room, which was always locked; but his grandson knew that it contained a bench, a lathe, and all the tools requisite for mechanical work. Sometimes he worked there till late at night, sometimes he would not come out even for dinner. There was something uncanny about the old fellow working by himself continually, nobody knew at what. He might have made watches, but he brought none out; he might have turned things with his lathe, but none were ever shown; he might have been prosecuting some grand research in the horological mystery, but he said nothing about it.

He kept on working till the day of his death. It happened, one Saturday evening, that his unmarried daughter and his daughter-in-law were in the drawing-room when the old man unexpectedly walked in. He stood before the fire and looked at them, turning from one to the other with a strange smile. It was so seldom that he came out of his own room that the two ladies were perplexed and a little frightened.

‘My work,’ he said, with another weird and uncanny smile, ‘is finished.’

The words were hardly spoken when he suddenly reeled, caught at a chair, and fell heavily to the ground in a fit.

In the morning he became conscious again, and presently began to understand that he was dying, and that he had better give any directions he had to give at once. They sent for his grandson who was at Cambridge, and it was to him, his heir, that the old man gave the one injunction that he seemed to care about. ‘Let no one,’ he said, shaking his long and lean forefinger in the most solemn manner, ‘let no one presume to enter my room. Let it remain locked, or if any desire to enter’—here he laughed and his hearers shuddered—‘let him enter alone and after dark. I shall be there,’ he added, while they shuddered again, ‘on the watch—a day and night watchman—a watch that always goes—a repeating watch, a keyless watch, with the newest improvements, an everlasting watch’—here his mind wandered a little—‘Watches neatly repaired. Established forty years. Clocks kept going.’ And then he laughed again and breathed his last. It was dreadful to see an old man die with a laugh upon his lips.

They buried him in the churchyard under a magnificent marble tomb, among a great number of Memblings, including his only son. And it was, as stated above, his grandson who succeeded, being then only one-and-twenty years of age.

His successor shortly afterwards married, and in course of time had a family, like most people, of sons and daughters. The young people knew very little about the watchmaker's shop, but they knew that the churchyard was full of Josiah Memblings, and very easily they grew to believe in a legendary history about the family greatness. They were the ancient holders of the estate, the lords of the manor; they were found on the spot by the Norman Conqueror; they experienced many adventures in the various civil wars; there came a time when their fortunes were quite fallen; even the Hall passed for a while out of their hands; then came the second founder, who amassed wealth in the City and bought back the old house. And they really did not know—the innocent girls who built up this legend—what a collection of fibs they were putting together.

For fifteen years and more the old man's last wishes were faithfully and piously obeyed. No one entered the old man's room at all; the key was in his grandson's possession; it became a matter of common belief that the old man haunted the room. The maids at dusk, and after dark, would hurry past the door; in full daylight they would stop and listen, trembling, if by chance they might hear the sound of a dead man's footfall; and the young members of the family were brought up to feel doubly grateful to an ancestor who had not only restored the fortunes of the house, but had endowed it with a haunted room.

One day, however, when Laura, the eldest daughter, was in her father's study looking for something else, she found hanging up in a cupboard the key of the haunted room. It was a bright sunny morning; there could be no fear of ghosts on such a day; she looked at the key; she remembered the solemn injunction, which of course everybody knew, but the sight of the key filled her with strange and irresistible curiosity and a longing such as she had never before known: she took it down with a trembling hand; she crept like a thief out of the study and up the broad stair to the door; she put the key in the lock and turned it. It was a little rusty, but the bolt flew back and she opened the door. Strange, how hard she had to press that door with her shoulder before it opened; she went in and looked round curiously, yet but for a single moment; a grating noise behind her caused her to turn quickly; to her horror the door was closing of its own accord, and a great bar was slowly rising behind it. She shrieked and fled;

there was just time; the door closed as she rushed through, there was a noise as of a falling bar, and Laura fainted away. When she recovered the maids were running up the stairs and about the house, wanting to know who had been ringing bells and who was making such a strange noise in the house.

When Laura told her story, her father put on the semblance of great wrath, but secretly he rejoiced because here was proof positive of the haunting. No family of yesterday ever got a ghost. In fact, it is only the members of an old family who can be got even to believe in ghosts at all. It is a curious thing that in poor and new neighbourhoods, like the East End of London, there seems no place for a ghost. Now, for a thick population of ghosts, give me Northumberland.

The next day, Laura said that she had felt a cold breath upon her cheek.

The day after, she said that a heavy sigh had fallen upon her ear as she fled.

The day after that, she said that the sigh was a faint whisper of the words 'My dear child.'

It was enough. The ghost was established. Henceforth unpleasant things might be said of money made in trade, but the old family tradition would not be attacked. There was the evidence of the supernatural bar, there was the door closed by an invisible hand, there was the voice, there was the ringing of bells, there were the strange noises heard by the maids while Laura was lying supine and unconscious. No ancient Scottish House ever had such a ghost. The Squire, however, put away the key in his strong box, among his valuables. The door, he said, should never again be opened in his lifetime. But Laura used to stand outside like a Peri, listening for another message from the other world, and it became recognised in the family that she was her great-grandfather's favourite. This gave her a kind of rank. Respect was due to one thus singled out by an ancestor who had been such a benefactor as to become not only the restorer of fallen fortunes (which is in itself romantic), but also the family ghost. All the Memblings walked more upright than before; they stuck out their chins, so to speak; they believed in their Coat of Arms; what was better, other people believed in it as well.

They entertained people at the Hall, and when they offered them quarters for the night spoke with reserve of the haunted room; they laughed, but with affection and reverence, not with scorn, at their ghost; the girls bade their friends, when they left them after a hair-brushing, have no fear, because their ancestor worked very quietly and disturbed no one outside his own room, though, they added, as might be plainly heard by anyone who listened at the door after dark, he was always at work. It was, in fact, one of Laura's fictions that she could hear the lathe at work, and the Squire, who good-humouredly received the avowed incredulity of his friends, always finished the conversation by saying that the key of the room was in his strong box, where he intended it to remain.

Things might have gone on in this quiet and peaceful manner until now but for a misfortune, the nature and extent of which will become presently apparent. All misfortunes, said the Sage (who married his cook), proceed from love.

Yet, who would have thought that the Humbling of the Memblings would have followed upon so simple and natural a thing as the engagement of young Dalmahoy to Laura? Certainly not she herself, nor her father, nor her sisters and brothers, because Dalmahoy was in every respect a most eligible *parti*, being not only young, tolerably well off, and handsome, a good waltzer, a good rider, a good shot, a good actor, and one of those gallant headlong lovers before whom feminine courage breaks down, but he was also—a point naturally insisted upon by the Memblings—a man of undeniably good family. There was no trace or taint of trade in the long line of Dalmahoys.

When Jack Dalmahoy came to Membling Hall—the girls almost believed that the place had never possessed any other name, so that they could, if they pleased, call themselves the Memblings of Membling—one of the first things they did, after showing him their gardens, stables, and other interesting parts of the establishment, was to tell him of the family ghost. He naturally laughed, and spoke with disrespect of the spectre. Laura rebuked him, letting it be understood quite plainly that she was to be taken with her ghost or not at all. Who would offend his mistress by objecting to such a trifle? 'I would gladly,' said Jack, 'have the ghost in my room every night if that would give you any pleasure. Invite him, Laura, to visit me.'

Laura gravely shook her head. This was not the proper spirit in which to speak of an ancestor who walked. He might even be listening at that very moment. Indeed, the opportune cracking of a piece of furniture gave some colour of probability to the supposition.

After dinner, when the ladies had gone, Jack asked the Squire to allow him to pass the night in the haunted room. His request was refused, gently but firmly.

'I am not,' said the chief of the Memblings, 'a particularly superstitious man, but the fact that there is undoubtedly something supernatural in the room, and the equally undoubted fact that the appearances and manifestations are connected with my grandfather, make me respect his desire to remain after death unmolested in what was, in his lifetime, his favourite room.'

Laura was angry when she heard of this proposal. Did Jack, she asked, consider her great-grandfather in the light of a common ill-bred ghost, one of those unthinking and vulgar ghosts who break the crockery, throw the furniture about, rattle chains, and are disagreeable in the house? 'For my part,' she said, 'I look upon the tenancy of this room by my dead ancestor as a singular proof of the affection in which he continues to regard us. His spirit remains with us,' she added, clasping her hands and turning her soft eyes, which were as limpid as a pair of opals, up to the heaven, 'because he loves us still. He is our guardian angel, he watches over the house. We are under his special protection, and if we were to lose him, through any act of irreverence or intrusion, farewell the luck of Membling Hall!'

Jack desisted, though loth to relinquish his interview with the ghost. Indeed, when one thinks how seldom one gets the chance of a talk face to face with a ghost, it is not surprising that Jack was sorrowful when it vanished. I have never myself had such a talk, and with the exceptions of a friend who saw the ghost of Joe Morgan, another who was privileged to amuse Lady Kitty, and a third who received Lady Bab, I think I know no one who has actually talked with them. And, without going quite so far as a certain learned counsel of my acquaintance, who ardently desires a half-hour's friendly interview with the devil, I must say that there are many ghosts for whom one would suffer a great deal of inconvenience and time. Doctor Johnson, Emanuel Swedenborg, Cagliostro, Doctor Dee, Cotton Mather, George Psalmanazar, the late Count of Albany, Robespierre, and Cornelius Agrippa, all occur to one in a breath as most interesting ghosts, if they would only come and talk in a friendly way and without frightening one. Two or three days afterwards Jack tried another line. As he could not be allowed to sit up all night and converse with the old watchmaker, he begged permission just to see the room. He would not go in, only open the door and look round. 'It is not, Laura,' he said, 'as if one wanted to go against your ancestor's express rule, simply to pay a kind of—mark of respect—you know—morning call—just to look at the place, not even to go into the room.'

I believe that one of the reasons why the Squire refused permission to spend the night in the room was that he was afraid of revelations.

You see, he knew more than his children, he entertained well-founded doubts as to the greatness of the House, he knew all about the shop, and it did occur to him that a conversation between his grandfather and his son-in-law might be awkward. Fancy a poor relation turning up when you have been comfortably established for a generation and a half, to remind your friends that the family crest was only forty years old or so, that the family history was fudge, and that the shop, the good, old, honest, despised shop, was the foundation, and not the restoration at all, of the House; and fancy a Membling asked to turn a guest into a room where he might, and very likely would, be informed by the purchaser of Membling Hall how his money was made. 'We have,' the Squire might have reasoned, 'a highly respectable family ghost. But there are reasons why that ghost should be kept in the family, and if it have disclosures to make or garrulous reminiscences to prattle upon, let these things be conveyed to the ear of a member of the family only. Or, as the ghost shows no inclination to leave his own room, let there be no disclosures at all. There is at least no occasion to invite revelations about the shop.'

The least ghostly time in the whole day, I take it, is the afternoon. No one expects even a medium to have any luck in the afternoon. *Séances* are always conducted after dark; old-fashioned wizards used to conjure up spirits at midnight; if devils, spectres, *lutins*, hobgoblins lasted till the morning, they were gone at all events by dawn. The 'garish light of day' is painful to supernatural eyes; they wink when it begins; they wink horribly if they have to endure it many minutes; long, long before noon they are away and in hiding. Who would have thought, then, that old Membling would have played the tricks he did, actually in the afternoon? You shall hear.

It was an afternoon in January—in the first week of the year. Snow was spread upon the fields, though it had melted on the roads; there was a gentle mist rising from the earth, through which the sun was shining feebly, a blurred circle of pale glory without warmth. But the sun was already sinking, and the pale winter twilight was going to begin, the mist and the white snow making it lighter than usual and yet ghostly, if one can use the word of a four-o'clock appearance—an afternoon-tea-time manifestation. The light was strange.

Jack Dalmahoy and Laura, after luncheon, sat together, talking of the little nothings which please young lovers. Presently the conversation flagged. Then some young and sprightly devil, seeing the chance of doing a little mischief by firing Jack's imagination, which had at the moment nothing to work upon (being tired of pretending imaginary perfections in his Laura), whispered in his ear that it would be something to pay a visit to the haunted room. 'The very thing!' cried Jack with alacrity.

'What is the very thing, Jack?' asked Laura, looking up with surprise.

'My dear girl,' he said, 'let us go this afternoon; go, beg the key, we will pay a visit to the haunted room!'

Laura hesitated.

'You know, dear girl,' said her lover, 'that you are yourself as curious to visit the room as I myself.'

'I have seen it,' she replied, 'and I heard——'

'Yes, Laura.' Jack had heard the story before. 'I perfectly remember. But we shall only open the door and look in. Go, dear, and ask your father for the key.'

The Squire gave his consent with some reluctance. He even returned with his daughter, bearing the key with as much respect as if it were the key of a city's gates, such as that which the citizens of a mediæval town used to bring out when they had eaten up their last rat.

'Here is the key,' he said solemnly; 'if you merely open the door and look in, no harm will be done, I should think. As the sun is setting, you might even, if you please, go in. The injunction was that no one was to go in except after dark, and alone. But Laura may be considered an exception.'

Jack said that if he went in Laura should go with him, and that, as regards respect, he would look on the room as the family vault. Laura said he meant, she presumed, the church, not the vault.

First he oiled the key, which was rusty; then, accompanied by Laura, he turned it in the lock, and with some difficulty, because, he said, it was like some fellow pushing on the other side. He succeeded in opening it.

Could the 'fellow,' Laura thought, with a shudder, be her revered ancestor?

When the door was open Jack forgot his promise, and stepped inside, looking about him curiously.

It was a long, low room, lighted by three narrow windows looking west, and reaching from floor to ceiling. It was most curiously furnished. For beside one window there was a table furnished exactly like one of those used by working watchmakers, with glasses in bone frames such as they stick in their eye when they look at a watch, and, observing a piece of dust, which they blow away and thereby release the machinery, declare that the watch requires cleaning, which will be eight-and-six. By such subtleties was the fortune of the Memblings commenced. Lamps, jets for gas, low stools, trays containing portions—dissected bones—of watches, small brushes and dusters, themselves covered with dust, now covered this table. Before the next window stood a lathe with tools, 'chunks,' and wheel. Before the next was another table, larger than the first, and covered with books, papers, mathematical instruments and drawings. 'My great-grandfather,' said Laura, thinking of the mythical and almost disbelieved shop of which even the younger members of the family were somehow conscious, 'was in his day a great mechanician.'

'What did he hang the walls with peacocks' feathers for?' asked Jack.

It was a strange thing: one side of the room was given over to a watchmaker's table, a lathe, and books on mechanics; the other side was decorated with everything bizarre, as if the old man had resolved on gratifying his own taste without consulting the taste of the age. A Persian carpet lay on the floor; there was a broad sofa on which he had often slept, covered with costly skins, a chair, also covered with skins, stood facing it; common tobacco pipes and a common tobacco jar stood upon the plain mantel-shelf, on which were such trifles as pots of glue and paste, glasses which suggested the 'rummer' of a country public-house, a spirit-case open, a note-book, and an umbrella. The fireplace itself was a beautiful specimen of costly brass-work and tiles, there were carved cabinets very precious, filled with china, though the old man died before the great china revival was born, and there were pictures worth crying over, so delightful were they. The whole of that side of the room was covered with peacocks' feathers attached one over the other to the wall. The ceiling of the room was of polished oak, dark and deep, relieved with a little gold. The effect of the pale wintry light falling upon their splendours was very strange. Laura clasped her lover by the arm and gasped. Then she looked round and shrieked.

Six years before this, when she stood within the room, she had seen the door closing slowly, *and of its own accord*, before her. Now as she turned she saw that the same thing was happening again, but that it was too late; for with a heavy, grating noise the door shut closely, while, also of its own accord, there slowly fell behind it a heavy wooden bar.

As the bar fell there was a sound as of a deep sigh. Then all was silent.

The pair, thus strangely made prisoners, looked at each other with pale faces. Even the man, as brave a fellow as may be, saw with a terror which froze his blood this great bar lifted without visible hands, and falling slowly as if guided into its place. He rushed to the door and tried to lift it. Its free end was lying in a strong clamp closed by some spring. He could not lift it out, nor could he by any strength tear it away and open the door.

Another shriek from Laura called him to her side.

'Fingers,' she cried, 'fingers at my throat! Jack, save me, save me!'

Jack took her in his arms and soothed her. 'Nothing,' he said, 'can hurt us. Whatever it is, nothing *shall* hurt you till it first—oh, Lord!'

He stopped, because a breath of ice-cold air blew violently into his face, and again the solemn sigh was heard. Laura sank upon the floor, in a terror the like of which she had never imagined or suspected. Jack lifted her gently and laid her upon the chair beside the fireplace.

What next? Laura held Jack by the hand, imploring him not to leave her—not to leave her alone. He stood beside her, his heart beating, his brain afire with wonder and terror. What next?

A third time they heard the sigh as of one in deep trouble and perhaps anger: again soft fingers touched Laura's throat, and again cold airs vexed their cheeks. Meantime it was growing darker: the sun was quite gone down; the short winter twilight was deepening into gloom, and the snow-fields through the windows stretched white and cold.

Then there began a ringing of bells and a beating of drums. Jack held Laura more tightly and whispered to her to be of good cheer; nothing, he declared with a positiveness which he did not feel, should or could hurt her while he was there.

The bells seemed all round them, as if they were being rung in their ears; they were soft and melodious bells, not harsh and strident, and the drums, like the bells, were soft; their rolling was as that of muffled kettle-drums, and when they stopped for a moment the heavy sigh was heard, as if lamenting the necessity for making all this noise. The bells rang and the drums beat for an hour and a half, as it seemed to the terror-stricken couple, prisoners in the room, who were fain to listen. In truth, they rang and beat for about five minutes, and then they stopped suddenly, and that dreadful, unseen person began to sigh again, heavily. Also Laura shrieked, because the fingers began to play again at her throat.

Of all forms of supernatural visitations, that of fingers at the throat has always seemed to me the least desirable. The apparition of a sheeted ghost, with or without chains, the squeezing of hands left inadvertently outside the sheets, the cold breathing upon the sleeping brow, the groaning behind wainscot walls, the dragging of chains, the sighing or sobbing by the bedside, the shying about of crockery, the shrieking in the garden, the upheaval of heavy furniture, the creaking on the stairs, the lurking in unsuspected places, the unreasonable claim to property in a place after you have become a ghost—all these things are effective, though perhaps overdone. New ghost machinery has to be invented if the popular imagination is to be fired, and I take it that the miserable falling off in ghosts during the last fifty years must be attributed mainly to the weariness of the imagination, which refuses any longer to be stirred by old-fashioned modes of spiritual manifestations. Even rapping has had its day, and one sees no hope for ghosts in the future, unless they are prepared to bring trustworthy information as to the rules and regulations *d'outre-mer*. Then, indeed, there would be so great a run upon ghosts that the good old times would come back again, and many a musty family ghost, long since laughed at, scorned, and forgotten, would return, to bloom and blossom again among a curious and credulous posterity.

But to have one's throat felt, touched, and fingered by ghostly fingers! That is, if you please, a thing which in no way attracts the curiosity or stimulates the imagination. Quite the contrary; it simply terrifies.

Laura shrieked and would have fainted, had she thought it would be of the least use. But she was too much terrified for fainting. In real moments of crisis, in supreme moments, as the prigs say, one is too much in earnest to faint. One may faint comfortably when a tooth is pulled out, and feel all the better for it afterwards, but when a more serious operation is performed no one thinks about fainting, and takes chloroform instead.

'N—n—othing,' said Jack, with less heart in his tone than he could have wished, 'c—can hurt you while I am here.'

Yet there were fingers at her throat, and just then Laura would have sacrificed all the honour and glory of the family ghost could she have found herself safe outside that dreadful door with the bar let down to keep them in. Or, suppose her Ancestor had appeared, hungering, ravening for a life, I believe she would have given up her lover in the same spirit of duty as prompted Agamemnon to sacrifice Iphigenia, so as to get out of the mess with as much ease and safety as possible. But all that they had heard and seen were mere trifles, bagatelles, skittles, apple tart, compared to what they were about to see.

Suddenly the bells which had been ringing a melodious peal, and the kettle-drums which had been beating a muffled harmony, clashed and clanged in a horrific discord, at the hearing of which Laura moaned and groaned, while Jack, clutching her hand as if for his own safety, murmured mechanically, 'N—n—n—nothing c—c—c—an h—h—h—hur—' and here his jaws stuck and he said no more.

For at the clang and clash of the bells the curtains fell before the windows, and they were in darkness absolute.

It seemed next as if the end of the room was taken away, and another room opened to their eyes.

There was nothing at all in this room, but it was lighted by a large window at the end, and a long narrow window at the side. The glimmer from the snow without gave sufficient light for the intruding pair to see the things which presented themselves.

The bells stopped, the drums stopped. Then there began a wailing plaintive music, a tune never heard on earth, which seemed, like the bells and the drums, to be played around them, above them, below them. And while this weird and ghostly tune was slowly played, there appeared suddenly, not, said Laura afterwards, as if they sprang from the ground or dropped from the skies, but suddenly, as if they came from nowhere, three skeletons. In the dim light one could discern their shadowy forms, the lean fingers with which they pointed, the long bony legs with which they danced—they actually danced!—the hollow, eyeless sockets and grinning teeth of the skulls. As they came, so they disappeared, as suddenly, as silently.

But the music, the supernatural, weird, and ghostly music, went on, and then—ah! then—the final manifestation appeared. For, as if he had stepped from the wall, Laura saw her great-grandfather—the Actual Family Ghost itself—walk slowly, and as if with difficulty, across the room, and as he neared the opposite wall, he turned, faced his great-granddaughter, and with his white locks and white beard faintly visible, he seemed to hold up a warning forefinger and disappeared.

Then the music ceased; the room of the ghost and skeletons disappeared; the curtains which had fallen before the windows were drawn back, and there was silence.

'Jack!' said Laura.

'G—g—g—ood heavens!' cried Jack.

'Are we living, Jack?'

'G—g—g—ghosts!' said Jack.

'Do you think it is over, Jack?' asked Laura.

'N—n—n—othing——' began Jack, when Laura, looking round, saw to her delight that there was a gleam of artificial light in the door-way, which showed that the door was open. She rushed to the place; the great bar was gone; the door was ajar; Laura yelled for help, rushed through, and fell headlong in the passage. The cause of her fall, I am ashamed to say, was no other than Jack himself, who rushed after her. Both fell down, like Jack and Jill, and lay sprawling together.

That evening Laura did not appear at dinner; her mother sent for the doctor, and she was ordered to bed. Somebody sat up all night with her, and in the morning she was delirious: the system, said the doctor, had sustained a severe shock.

As for Jack, he ordered his things to be got ready at once, and drove straight back to Colchester, leaving word that he was ordered back on regimental duty. But when he got there he was fain to drink so much soda-and-brandy that he too, like Laura, was put to bed.

Thus, for two or three days, the story of the dreadful apparition at Membling Hall never got about.

When Laura got better she told the story, sitting up in bed, to her sisters: she was a girl of a fine imagination and an eye to dramatic situation, therefore the story lost nothing in the telling; the sighs, the sobs, the cold breath, the fingers at the throat, the skeletons, the bells, and the weird music, with the dread vision of her great-grandfather at the end, were all duly narrated. The sisters told their father. The Squire enjoined secresy, but left a corner open in the case of trusted friends; everyone had a trusted friend. Therefore, before Jack returned, he was assailed on all sides by questions about the ghost of Membling Hall, and had to explain, although with fear of making himself ridiculous, that it was a real, unmistakable ghost—a devil of a ghost, accompanied by every kind of row and appearance calculated to shake a fellow's nerves and make him feel uncomfortable. Jack was not a man of lively imagination, but the things he had seen were so extraordinary that he had only to tell them exactly as he had seen them. And it would be wonderful, had we the time, to relate the two forms which the story took when related by Laura the imaginative, and by Jack the matter-of-fact.

Think, however, of the pride of the Memblings at this proof incontrovertible of their family ghost. Where was there, anywhere in England, a house with such a ghost, so complete in all its parts, so provided with machinery, material gear, and supernatural assistants? Was it not a great honour to them that their ghost did not appear unattended, but was provided with a body-guard, or spirit-ward, of three dancing skeletons? Was there any other ghost at whose bidding bells would ring and drums would beat? It was like a royal progress. Josiah Membling's spirit was welcomed, as he himself would have wished, like a Lord Mayor on Lord Mayor's day. Did ever man hear tell of any other ghost who could command, so to speak, a private orchestra of his own, to play music at his coming!

The mere telling of the story became a fearful joy to Laura and to the faithful Jack. It was a dreadful experience to have undergone; but, like a shipwreck on a desert island, once worried through, it became a grand and splendid distinction. Laura's sisters envied her: Laura's brothers envied her. The Squire was proud of her; the story brought the greatest credit to the family: Laura might have adopted the motto of Queen Elizabeth, *Dux femina facti.*

She became an extremely interesting person, and began to cultivate the sadness which belongs, somehow, to all persons privileged to hold communication with the outer world. She sat in shadowy corners, or in the dim firelight without a lamp, in the long and dark room called the library, where she told her story with clasped hands, while the light of the fire reddened her pale cheek and showed up the luminous depths of her large soft eyes; her audience gathered round her catching breathlessly at her words, and looking over their shoulders on the chance of seeing the spectre behind them. But he never came. 'My great-grandfather,' said Laura, 'will never, I am persuaded, leave the room in which he has chosen to dwell. Let us have no fear. Indeed,' she added, smiling sadly, 'why should we fear? He who restored the fortunes of the House, and is good enough to watch over it after his passing away, can hardly be feared. He may hear, no doubt he does hear, all that is said and done in the Hall, therefore let us always speak of him with the Reverence and Awe which he deserves.'

They came from all parts of the country to hear the story. Laura was obliged to be at home every afternoon. Jack was not allowed to leave her chair, in order to be ready to corroborate any statement. He shone as the lesser light, not being permitted to tell the story himself because he was not a good *raconteur*, and because a certain sterility of imagination forbade those developments of facts which are necessary in a perfect ghost story. But he could put in a word by way of proof, and was immensely useful as the Witness. A ghost, like a miracle, requires the testimony of two or more credible persons.

'I shall never,' said Laura, 'never again bear to hear the least frivolous or scoffing allusion to the appearance of Spirits. The subject will always be associated in my mind with a Manifestation which was truly Awful.'

'Awfully Awful,' said Jack, behind her chair.

'I cannot understand, now, how I lived through it. Indeed, I must have died with terror, had it not been for the invincible fortitude of Jack, who, I will say in his presence, behaved with perfect courage and reverence throughout. What reassured me first, and convinced me that no harm was intended, was the celestial music which preceded the most awe-inspiring sight, the last scene of all.'

'What was it like, the music?' whispered a young lady.

'Like a waltz tune,' said Jack.

'Not the least like a waltz tune,' said Laura. 'You might as well call a recitative from Handel a waltz tune: better, in fact, because Handel's music is the work of a man, whereas this—oh! this that we heard—whose work was it?' She lifted hands and eyes, and remained silent in ecstatic contemplation of the ceiling. 'My dear,' she continued after an interval, during which the gentlemen thought they were in church and looked into their hats, 'it is impossible to describe that music. It fell upon the soul like some utterance of Power: we were awed, not terrified by it——'

'It was something like a musical box,' said Jack.

'It was nothing of the sort, sir,' Laura interrupted. 'The sound was like no earthly music. It was tuneful, but no human voice could reproduce the tune: the harmonies were too subtle and too profound for human art; the instruments may have been in form like our own, but of a sweetness, of a force, which I could never, never hope to convey to your imagination.'

'Made a devil of a row,' Jack whispered, in corroboration, to a man beside him.

'Was there any singing?' asked another lady. 'Oh! if they had sung a hymn—*what* an addition to our choir it would have been!'

'I heard no words,' Laura sighed. 'That is, I could distinguish none. But it seemed to me as if, far off—oh! far, far away—there was a choir of voices upraised in harmony.'

'One fellow groaning——' Jack began, but was instantly checked as Laura went on——

'The music preceded the Dance of Death'—Laura stopped and trembled—'nothing more terrible could be conceived. As the skeletons danced, pointing their long bony fingers at us, they seemed to warn us of the flight of time. Their aspect was not forbidding, nor were their gestures angry.'

'Grinned at us,' said Jack, 'like the very——'

'Could,' interrupted Laura, hastily, 'could such a pageant, such a spiritual apparition, have suggested the "Danse Macabre" to Holbein and the mediæval painters?'

'Like a hornpipe,' said Jack. 'Never saw such a lively lot: double-shuffle, heel-and-toe, walk-round, all complete.'

'How long did the dance continue?' asked a visitor, shuddering.

'We took no count of time,' replied Laura. 'I do not suppose that, as the clocks went, we were in the room for ten minutes; yet what we saw must have taken about a day and a half, at least. How long, Jack, do you think the bells were ringing?'

Jack shook his head, and said he thought they were never going to stop.

'Then,' continued Laura, 'there were the sighings and the sobbings, the cold winds, the beating of the drums, the playing of the music before the Terrible Dance. Hour after hour passed away: we were ravished out of ourselves: we were lost in wonder and awe: we felt no hunger: our pulses stopped, and the beating of our hearts! We were without any fear, were we not, Jack?'

'Quite,' replied Jack. 'I was never more composed in my life.'

'But there was more, was there not?' asked another visitor. 'We heard that you saw the spirit of your Ancestor himself.'

Laura sank her voice to a whisper.

'You heard aright,' she said solemnly. 'The manifestations ended with no less an appearance than that of my revered Ancestor himself, the Restorer of the House—even the Second Founder.' She spoke as if Julius Cæsar himself or even King Alfred had been the first of the Memblings.

'How—how did he appear?' gasped her audience.

'He was dressed in a long dressing-gown, such as he usually wore in his lifetime.'

'And yet,' murmured a triumphant spiritualist, one of the audience, 'they say that ghosts have no clothes. Absurd! Matter, as has been proved over and again, can always be represented visibly by spirits. Pray go on, Miss Membling. I have never during all my investigations met with a more interesting experience than this of yours. It will confound every sceptic.'

'Dressed in his long gown,' Laura resumed, 'he moved slowly, almost painfully, across the room. He appeared suffering from the debility of extreme old age——'

'Quite so—quite so!' the spiritualist rubbed his hands. 'I have always maintained that they appear as they left the world, no older and no younger. Pray go on.'

'As he moved he turned his face towards us and smiled. You saw him smile, Jack, as plainly as I did?'

'Well,' said Jack, with hesitation, 'he certainly wagged his head, and I saw his beard wobble, but I can't honestly say that I saw him smile.'

'He would not smile for a stranger,' said the spiritualist.

'The most benignant countenance: the sweetest smile: the kindest look in his eyes: with long silvery locks and a white beard. As he disappeared, he raised his hand as if to bestow his benediction upon us. You saw that, Jack?

'Oh, yes! he lifted his hand.'

'I think, but I am not sure, that I heard him murmur a blessing as he disappeared.'

'Did he, now,'—asked the scientific explorer of Ghostland—'did he sink into the ground, or did he ascend into the air?'

'He disappeared,' said Laura. 'He seemed to touch the wall and to vanish.'

'He came out of one wall,' said Jack, 'and went into the other wall.'

'And did you,' asked the spiritualist, 'hear the Blessing?'

'No, I did not,' replied Jack.

'The Blessing,' explained the scientific specialist, 'was for the House alone. You heard nothing, then?'

'Why,' Jack said, considering, 'he shuffled a bit with his feet as if his slippers were uneasy.'

And so it went on, day after day, Laura receiving the visitors and telling the story over and over again. Jack was neither imaginative, nor was he properly impressed. He had seen things and heard things: that was undeniable. But he drew no conclusions. He was thus a foil to Laura, and by his very downright matter-of-fact doggedness he corroborated her statements. The story, little by little, improved: the heavenly music was, in a few days, provided with a heavenly choir; the bells were a peal; the dance of death was a procession of skeletons, who danced as they crossed the room, in number about a hundred and fifty; the Benediction of the Ancestor was pronounced in a solemn whisper which could not reach the grosser ear of Jack, but was perfectly audible to Laura. The fair narrator herself became daily more penetrated with the greatness and grandeur of her position: she also, to Jack's disgust, became more spiritualised, tried to live on nothing, grew certainly pale and thin, and ceased to take the same interest as of old in the little tendernesses which her lover was willing to lavish upon her.

It was agreed, by the advice of the spiritualist, that the history should be written down—soberly, he said, and with due attention to dates, times, and the corroborative testimony of Jack—and printed, for the good of the world and the solace of mankind. Laura spent, therefore, a fortnight in the production of what was called a 'Plain Statement.' Her intimate friends observed that the written narrative did not quite correspond with her former statements, and Jack owned that he had not heard the choir singing hymns, nor seen the Blessing with both hands. But these things mattered little in the face of so tremendous and undoubted a series of apparitions.

The Squire gave his consent to have the story printed—but, he said, for private circulation only. Let the knowledge of the Ghost be whispered abroad: that could not, he supposed, be avoided: but the actual facts concerned only the immediate friends of the House, and not the general public, whose curiosity he, for one, was not disposed to gratify by relating private events, and the experiences, however singular, of his daughter. The 'Narrative' or 'Plain Statement' was accordingly printed on the finest and creamiest of toned paper, with a portrait of the Ancestor. The date of his death was not stated, but from the mediæval appearance of the face and the cut of the beard, in which the limner improved on the original oil painting (that of Josiah Membling as a Common Councilman), the venerable Ancestor might have belonged to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. All this greatly added to the glory of the family, and tended to confirm their position as belonging to the County. With what face could any one sneer at people as new comers whose ancestors remained in their old rooms, and appeared to give benedictions to the female branches of their posterity? Could the Howards, the Courtenays, the Montmorencies, the Lusignans, expect more?

The 'Narrative' off her hands, Laura began to descend slowly from the higher spiritual levels and to talk of ordinary things in her ordinary manner, so that Jack Dalmahoy plucked up courage and renewed his courtship at the point where the ancestral spirit had broken it off. He was by this time growing weary of the worship or cult of the old ghost, and it bored him to be perpetually recalling the dancing skeletons and the shadowy figure with the long white hair. Then, it was annoying for a plain man to be constantly invited to remember a heavenly chorus, a benediction, a warning look, or a sweet and gracious smile. Therefore he was anxious to get his courtship over and to carry away his bride.

When he mentioned the desirability of naming the day, Laura declared at first that nothing should ever persuade her to leave a house possessed of so many and such rare blessings. Jack argued that if a girl gets engaged she means to have her own house. Laura replied that she had not, on entering into the engagement, foreseen that she should receive the benediction of her Ancestor. Jack responded that the benediction did not tell her that she was not to get married, 'unless,' he added, with unusual bitterness, 'you are going to marry your great-grandfather yourself? Don't believe——' He stopped short here, thinking it would be well not to say anything about the heavenly choir or the gracious smile till after his marriage.

Laura reflected, sweetly holding her hands clasped and her head a little on one side in the attitude of reflection. The thought crossed her mind that it would be a pity to give up such a good-natured, good-looking, and well-to-do lover for the sake of a ghost whom, perhaps, she would never see again. And presently she murmured softly, 'Jack, do you think my Ancestor would come with us to our new home and abide with us?'

'Oh, Lord!' cried Jack in a voice of such genuine consternation that Laura forgot her affectation and burst into a hearty laugh, after which Jack found no difficulty in getting her to talk about a day.

They were to be married after Lent, that was agreed upon, and after an infinite amount of discussion it was further covenanted that the day should be the last day of April. This gave them a clear five weeks for preparation, and Jack was ordered back to his garrison work to be out of the way until he should be wanted to take his part in the approaching ceremony.

The excitement of the time that followed kept Laura's thoughts a good deal from her ghost, whose home was not further intruded upon. By some curious current of feeling, assisted, no doubt, by Laura's appropriation of the family ghost to herself, it was generally considered that the ghost might feel offended at the departure of the one member of the family to whom he had condescended to reveal himself, one lady going so far as to prophesy disaster. And when it came, in way and manner as shall be presently set forth, she only said it was what she expected and always said would happen, and that if Laura had not been bent upon going away, no doubt evil spirits would not have been allowed to work their wicked will, and all this shame would not have fallen upon the family.

Among the members of the Dalmahoy family was a first cousin of Jack's, a young fellow of an inquiring mind, who was reading at Cambridge for mathematical honours. He was invited to be best man to his cousin on the joyful occasion, and joined the wedding party at Membling Hall two or three days before the auspicious morning. The house was quite full, and the usual excitement of looking at the wedding presents, flirting with the bridemaids, dancing, and the rest of it, passed the time more agreeably for Mr. George Dalmahoy than if he had been dining in the college hall and spending his evenings in an undergraduate's room. Of course almost the first thing which he heard of was the ghost, and this immediately fired his imagination.

He read the 'Narrative.' Then he cross-examined Jack, and elicited from him that the superstructure, so to speak—the heavenly choir and the rest of it—was an addition made by Laura herself after the event; that is to say, Jack neither saw nor heard any of it. On the other hand, there could be no manner of doubt that the 'Narrative' was substantially true, and that very strange things had happened.

Mr. George Dalmahoy determined that he too would, if possible, witness these things. Why should not the ghost appear to him as well as to his cousin? As for the Benediction, he dismissed it with contempt. Jack had seen an old man's figure, bent, with streaming white hair, 'shuffling,' as he put it, across the floor. That was by itself quite remarkable enough. ‘No need,’ said George, ‘of any benedictions; enough to be able to show himself, lucky old ghost!’ He considered himself an expert in the art of investigating stories of ghosts. He was, to begin with, entirely incredulous, and, in the second place, he knew that it is nonsense to deny phenomena. Raps, for instance, are certainly heard, ears are boxed in the dark, noses pulled, heads banged. He had once inflicted unspeakable mortification on a medium by beginning the raps himself before she was ready, and spelling out dreadful messages which she did not understand; and on another occasion, when a spirit had been good enough to ‘incarnate’ herself, this untrustworthy person lit a match and disclosed no other than the medium herself dancing about wrapped in a newspaper. He had also written an article on the subject for a college magazine, and had a shelf full of books treating of spiritualism. He was thus fully prepared for an encounter with the Ancestor of the Memblings, and ardently longed to begin.

He first approached the subject with Laura, asking her, reverently, if one could be allowed to visit the haunted chamber after dark. She replied with emotion that no one with her consent should be allowed to open the door of that room at all. She considered that to disturb its occupant was pardonable only when done by inadvertence and ignorance, as happened to herself and Jack. As for a stranger presuming to do so, that, she said, would most likely draw upon his head the most fatal consequences. She could only compare the daring of such a deed with the audacity of the ancient king, who drew the lightning down from heaven and was killed by it as a punishment.

Thus rebuffed, George Dalmahoy went to head-quarters and sought the Squire in his library. Mr. Membling was an easy man, a little touchy about his ancient birth, but now in excellent spirits and on the best of terms with everybody, in consequence of the highly creditable match his daughter was making. Naturally he was disposed to receive all the bridegroom's people with great civility.

It was after luncheon, and a glass or two of burgundy had disposed the Squire to benevolence towards all mankind. He was seated before the fire, his legs crossed, his hands folded, prepared for the sleep which sometimes overtakes middle-aged gentlemen after a comfortable midday meal. To him George stole softly, and taking a chair by the fire, turned the conversation adroitly on ancient families. Then he began to talk about the peculiarities of families, their ways, their distinctive marks, their little characteristic possessions, how a stutter distinguishes the sons of one house, and a distinctive birth-mark the sons of another; how in one house no eldest son ever succeeds, and in another ill luck pursues all the daughters; how a Banshee belongs to one family, a White Lady to another, and a little child to a third. 'As to your own house,' said George, 'we have all heard of your ancient ghost.' George put it as if the ghost had been established many centuries.

The Squire laughed pleasantly.

'Yes, we have our ghost, and I assure you, Mr. Dalmahoy, that we are rather proud of the distinction, as one may call it.'

'A distinction truly! Particularly so well authenticated a ghost as it is. You keep the chamber locked, I believe?'

'Yes. You see, we would not have the maids frightened, nor would we—perhaps you think us superstitious—disturb the occupant.'

'Quite so—quite so,' said George. 'However, ghosts only walk at night, and as there is no possible fear of disturbing the occupant by daylight, I wish you would lend me the key; I should like just to look round the room, if you have no objection.'

'Well, you see,' replied the Squire, 'the fact is, we have rather a strong objection. The last words of the—the spirit—were that no one was to dare enter the room unless alone and after dark.'

'I respect your feeling,' said George; 'yet I think it would be most injudicious to invade the privacy of the room—after dark. Everything that we know, my dear sir'—here he assumed the character of a believer—'everything that we have learned respecting apparitions, the manners and customs, the preferences, so to speak, of the outer world, shows us that its inhabitants, when they reside among us, are in some way prevented from feeling our intrusion or even our presence in the daytime. They may be sleeping; they may be'—here he dropped his voice and paused—'elsewhere. Their power to be seen and heard is given them for use after dark alone.'

'That seems very true,' said the Squire; 'it was after dark that Laura——'

'So that, in asking you to hand me the key of the room,' his visitor went on, 'I am really doing nothing more than seeking to gratify a curiosity—call it idle, or say it springs from reverence—a desire, in fact, only to see the theatre of these curious and unique manifestations.'

The Squire, moved by these words and by the benevolence of burgundy, and recognising the spirit in which they were uttered, went to his safe and produced the key, adjuring his guest, at the same time, should he see anything, to leave the room immediately.

With a cheerful mien George Dalmahoy proceeded to the haunted chamber.

He experienced the same difficulty in opening the room which had been felt by his cousin. The key turned pretty easily, but the door stuck. And when he pushed it open there was heard a grating noise which did not seem natural to the nature of a door.

We have seen what manner of room was the haunted chamber. But when it was last visited it was in the pale twilight of a January day. Now, at the end of April, the sun was shining brightly through the windows, and the room was cheerful. Certainly not at all the sort of time for a ghost to walk. Spectres shun sunshine, as the copy-books might say. George looked about him with a little disappointment. A curiously furnished room: that was all.

His disappointment did not last long: a creaking sound behind made him turn round. A large bar was slowly descending across the door. The progress was slow, but it finished by dropping into its place: the door was closed. George tried to lift the bar. It was immovable.

'Good!' he said. 'This is how Jack began. Can it be that the Ancestor is going to take an afternoon dander round the room?'

Apparently he was, because the closing of the door was followed by the ringing of bells, beating of drums, sighs, a breath of cold air which had so terrified his cousin.

While he was listening and watching—in some disquietude, it must be owned—he felt something delicate and light touching his cheek; he turned quickly. Nothing.

'Bells,' he said, 'there certainly are, and drums; and there is a noise which Tom said was sobbing; it seems to me like—Hallo!'

Again the gentle touch upon his cheek; this time he put up his hand as one catches at a troublesome fly, and caught—one of the peacock's feathers. He then observed that several of them were slowly lifting themselves up and down.

'This,' said George Dalmahoy, 'is more curious than the bells.'

Mounting on a chair he examined the place where the feather was attached to the wall. To his great surprise he found that it was fitted into a small brass tube, and that the tube itself was moving slowly up and down, carrying the feather with it.

'Very odd,' said George. 'It was not a ghostly finger at my throat but a feather: and the feather is not lifted by a ghostly hand, but by a brass tube. And what the devil lifts the brass tube? I suppose,' he added after a pause, 'that the same thing lifts the brass tube which rings the bells and beats the drums. Is it the Ancestor? Would he come if I called him names?'

It seemed as if the Ancestor must have heard these irreverent remarks, because at that moment the wall at the end of the room seemed suddenly to disappear; the bells ceased, and music of some kind was heard.

'All this,' said George, feeling more than a little afraid, 'is most wonderful, and just as Jack reeled it all out. To be sure, I could not make out how he could have invented it. What next? Oh, Lord!'

For at that moment the skeletons appeared and began to dance.

The young man's knees knocked together for a moment and his cheek turned pale. Then he rallied his courage and 'made for' the skeletons.

They were capering with the most grotesque and extraordinary agility, legs and arms moving all at once, skulls shaking and nodding; even the backbone twisting, or at least seeming to twist. George presently seized one of the arms.

'Gad,' he cried, 'it's real bones—with wire in the joints—real ribs—and'—here he laughed aloud—'they are all three hanging by strings!'

He contemplated this phenomenon with curiosity, but no terror.

Then the lower panels of the wall beside him opened, and there came out the figure of a man.

'Aha!' said George, 'here is the Ancestor! How are you, old boy?'

The figure was dressed in a long dressing-gown, and had on silk stockings and old-fashioned knee-breeches. The knees were bent and the figure stooping, and as it moved slowly and by jerks, it seemed to be on the point of falling to pieces. George stopped in front of it, and began calmly to feel and punch it.

'You're stuffed with sawdust,' he said contemptuously, 'and you are dropping to bits, and the moths have got into your poor old sleeve; and the white wool is falling off your poor old pate, and your mask is hanging by a thread. You an Ancestor? You ridiculous old MUG!'

The miserable ghost made no reply, but continued its journey across the room. When he reached the opposite wall the panels opened to admit him, and he disappeared.

'This is the Ancestor!' said George, in great enjoyment. 'Shut up, you with your dancing, you poor old skeletons! Nobody cares about you. This is the benevolent Ancestor! This is his Benediction! This is his sweet and winning smile! Ho! ho! ho!'

Just then the music ceased: the skeletons disappeared—that is to say, they flew up into the ceiling: there was a sigh as if somebody was tired and glad that the job was over: George observed that what he had taken for a disappearance of part of the wall was really only the folding back of the middle of a wooden partition wall cutting off one end of the room. He also observed that the bar of the door was lifting as slowly as it had fallen.

All was over, therefore.

He had seen the family ghost: it was a big doll, dropping slowly to pieces with age, damp, and the ravages of moths; he had seen the fearful procession or Dance of Death, 'the gibbering skeletons succeeding one another in swift succession, each playing its antics as it passed, and beckoning to us with lean and bony fingers.' (Extract from the 'Narrative.')

Well, there were three musty skeletons let down from a trap in the ceiling by strings or wires, the lifting and dropping of which produced their contortions and dancings. He had heard the 'celestial orchestra, faint, though complete in all its parts, playing music not to be described, yet ever to be remembered, accompanied by a choir of faint sweet voices, singing what seemed a hymn of praise.' (Extract from 'Narrative.') Yes, he had heard it. 'By Gad,' he said, 'it was a musical-box, and it played an old-fashioned slow *trois-temps*! As for choir and heavenly voices—fudge!'

He had heard the bells and the drums. Yes; there were bells and drums; who could have rung the bells and beaten the drums?

The bar was up: he could go: the show was over.

Yet, what did it mean?

George went to one of the windows and looked out, thinking. Beside him stood a table, of which we know. He took up one or two of the things: they were instruments used in making and mending a watch. The table was an old, rough, black bench, which, in fact, had been the old man's bench during all the years of his working life. 'I remember,' said George, 'one of them made his money in trade: he was a watchmaker.' Then he saw before the next window a lathe with all the appliances, and a carpenter's bench fitted up with tools. Half-made things, rounded blocks, pulleys, small light chains, lay about the bench. 'Old man was a carpenter and turner too, I suppose,' said George. Then he went to the next table. This was covered with books and papers. 'Old man read mechanics,' said George. He took up one of the sheets covered with drawings. Then he took up another. Then he looked round him and nodded. Then he laughed. Then he looked at his watch. Then he went to the carpenter's bench, took out some tools, and proceeded to work.

It was a quarter of an hour before he finished, and already past five o'clock. He rubbed his hands with the greatest satisfaction. 'This,' he said, 'is the best day's work I have ever done.'

Then he opened the door and stepped out.

'Holy Moses!' he cried, surprised into an exclamation which cannot be justified, and yet must be considered pardonable when one has to tell what he saw.

Now it came to pass that, just as the bells began to ring in the haunted chamber, Laura herself, accompanied by one of the bridemaids, passed by the door. What was her terror and astonishment to hear the dread sound, only heard by herself, begin again! 'He calls me!' she cried, grasping her friend by the arm. 'He calls me; I must go!'

She rushed to the door, but could not open it.

'Can it be,' she gasped, 'that there is some one in the room? Is it Jack? Oh, Katie, run, run to my father—he is in the library—tell him to bring the key. . . . Ah! it is in the lock—tell him to come—to come quickly!'

On being awakened, Mr. Membling acknowledged that he had lent the key to George Dalmahoy, and followed the bridemaid to the door. By this time the greater part of the guests were assembled on the spot, grouped round Laura, who stood gazing at the door, her hand clasping the faithful Jack's. The bells were certainly ringing and the drums beating: presently the sound of music was heard.

'Hush!' said Laura. 'It is the heavenly music; I hear the voices of those who sing.'

She sank on her knees; the other girls followed her example: kneeling in a semicircle, reverential, but careful that their dresses lay in becoming folds. An ignorant spectator might have thought that they were rehearsing the ceremony of the next day. Behind the kneeling girls stood some of the elder ladies and one or two gentlemen. As for Jack, he stood, Laura still holding his hand, visibly disconcerted. He had a round hat, having just come from a walk, and when Laura implored him to kneel too, he compromised by putting his head in his hat.

They continued to kneel during the whole time of the noises; when they had ceased, they heard a tapping and a hammering. So they went on kneeling, though all were getting anxious to see what would come of it. And it was into this group that George Dalmahoy plunged when he opened the door and uttered that rude and irreverent interjection.

Laura shrieked; they all sprang to their feet, and shrieked together like a chorus on the stage.

George looked in bewilderment. Then he laughed; he laughed long and loud.

'He is mad,' said Laura, suddenly.

George laughed louder still.

'Jack, this is dreadful,' said Laura.

The others stared in a sort of amazement; what could the man be laughing at? It was like a comic song of which only the singer sees the point. They all looked so bewildered, and Laura so awestruck and terrified, that George speedily ceased laughing. Indeed, the belief in the ghost was now so deep in everybody's heart that they had finally made up their minds that the rash young man, like one who inadvertently looked upon Artemis in the forest, had been slain by the angry Ancestor, or else, like him who chanced to meet great Pan, had been stricken by some madness. And lo! he was before them laughing like an idiot.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' said the young man, 'I have an important announcement to make. The ghost walks by day as well as by night. If you will follow me into the room, you shall see him for yourself. He is a most obliging ghost, and will do no harm to anybody.'

He laid his hand upon the handle of the door as he spoke.

They looked at each other.

'Oh,' cried Laura, 'this is dreadful! Jack, stop him! Mr. Dalmahoy, do not call others after you to their undoing! Oh! What shall we do? what shall we do?'

For now George pushed open the door and the wedding guests crowded after, Jack and Laura following with the rest. Last of all came the Squire, and upon his face there was a look of anxiety. He had a sense of impending evil.

'Spirit of my Ancestor!' cried Laura, sinking upon her knees, 'forgive them! Forgive us all! Let not this intrusion lead thee to revoke thy Benediction.'

Strange to say, this appeal produced no effect upon the young madman, who only laughed scornfully.

'You shall see him directly,' he said: 'you can then ask him yourself.'

At this moment the door shut noisily.

'Look at the bar,' said George; 'that is the first business; now we are shut in.'

They all looked at each other, after observing the descent of the bar.

'The whole secret lies in the bar,' he went on. 'Now look at this wall; you will see the peacock's feathers jumping up and down; if anybody is within reach, they will feel the light touch of ghostly fingers on their cheeks. Very fine business this, for a spectre in a country house.'

In fact, this happened as he had foretold.

'Ghostly fingers, Jack,' said George to the joint author of the 'Narrative.' 'Next, bells and drums.'

They began; George pushed aside two panels and showed a bell ringing in each, and a small kettle-drum being beaten in each. The drum-sticks were attached to the frame of the drum by hinges, and were worked by some unknown machinery.

'Very fair business that,' said George. 'These are your church bells, Jack, ringing a regular peal. Two little hand bells, ladies and gentlemen. Next, the sighing and sobbing, with the cold breath.'

He opened another panel and disclosed a great pair of bellows pointed directly to the group of spectators. It began to heave up and down slowly with a noise like a hollow groaning, and the cold air was distinctly felt. 'The sigh of the grave and the breath of the tomb,' said George, again quoting from the 'Narrative.' 'You will next, ladies and gentlemen, observe—ah! there it is'—for then the partition fell back—'now the skeletons.' Here they appeared, and they really seemed to dance as if they had no heart left for the work, and were quite ashamed of themselves. 'Three of them—go and feel them, anybody—simple bones, hanging from the ceiling, out of which they fell, by strings. This is the grand procession where every . . . .

eh, Jack?' He did not continue the extract from the 'Narrative,' because Laura was staring straight before her, an angry light in her eyes, and a flush upon her cheek.

'Next,' he went on, 'we have the Ancestor himself.' In fact, at that moment, the poor old doddering figure came out; he looked so palpably a stuffed doll in the machine, his face was so evidently a mask, his hair was so certainly white wool, his knees were so groggy with loss of sawdust, and his whole appearance was so inexpressibly moth-eaten, shabby, and woe-begone, that it was impossible to resist laughing at him. Everybody laughed, including the Squire, though he felt sadly that the laugh was going to turn against himself. There were two exceptions: Laura did not laugh, she looked on in icy wrath and shame; and Jack did not laugh, because he felt that if he laughed at that moment, Laura would most certainly never forgive him. Therefore he preserved great solemnity.

This time it was not George Dalmahoy, but one of the bridemaids who whispered so that all could hear, quoting from the 'Narrative': 'the sweet and gracious smile with which he turned his face towards us, and, uplifting his venerable hands, bestowed his benediction.' She was a pretty girl, who was said to have had designs upon Jack Dalmahoy, and has since married his cousin George. But for some reason or other Laura does not like her.

The poor old Ancestor disappeared in the opposite panel. 'He goes backwards and forwards,' said George; 'if we do this thing again, he will come out and cross over to the other side. The performance is about to conclude, and, ladies and gentlemen, I am sure that, in retiring from this caravan, you will confess that you have never before witnessed on so grand a scale so ingeniously constructed a piece of——CLOCKWORK.'

Laura, as soon as the door was opened, passed out the first, followed by Jack, whom, however, she pushed away roughly; then she went to her own room and no one saw her again that day, for, when the second dinner-bell was rung, she sent down a message that she had a headache.

The Squire, too, with abashed countenance, sought solitude for a time. But at dinner he appeared jocund, in high spirits, even forced spirits, and after dinner proposed the health of Mr. George Dalmahoy, who, he said, had rid the house of a very unpleasant occupant—its ghost, and they were all extremely grateful to him. All the members of the family murmured their profound gratitude, and a certain bridemaid, already mentioned, laughed a little laugh which everybody understood to be the equivalent of the immortal 'Fudge!'

And then George proposed another performance, but the Squire gently remarked that even of mechanical ghosts one might have enough. The irrepressible young man therefore spent the evening, until they began to dance, in explaining how he had discovered the secrets of the machinery, the spring wound by the door, the lubricating oil, and all the rest of the apparatus. All this greatly pleased the family because it brought vividly home to them the mechanical genius of their great-grandfather, and destroyed their ghost and the ancestral glory of the House. It also pleased one of the bridemaids—the one already alluded to.

The next day's wedding was rather a dull affair. Somehow, the romance of the thing was gone. Ghost, indeed ! The impudence of *parvenus* in assuming a ghost when there are already many really old families with no ghost at all, or at best the mere memory and shadow of a ghost. And the honeymoon would have been altogether a time of rebuke, but that Jack put his foot down and would hear no more nonsense about the ghost.

THE MURDER OF NICK VEDDER

A TALE OF NIAGARA.

THE MURDER OF NICK VEDDER.

I WAS playing euchre—cut-throat euchre—one night last September, in a certain house at Niagara Falls, with two young ladies, when this story was narrated to us; but when we had heard it, we played no more.

Cut-throat euchre, if one may be allowed a word of preface, cannot, probably, have its full flavour brought out, and so justify its sponsors, without the melo-dramatic accompaniments of a miner's shanty, a cask for a table, a rock-oil lamp swinging from a beam in the low roof, a whisky bottle for refreshment, and for players, two hawks and a pigeon, or even three hawks. Played in a drawing-room, for love, to the merry music of girls' laughter, it is a burlesque rowdy hiding a jovial face behind a ferocious mask, a mere play-acting creature of innocency disguised as a Bandit.

While we played, we talked of the one subject which most interests visitors at Niagara, the rapacity and knavery of the hackmen, the drivers of the hired buggies who infest the cliffs about the Falls, make every walk a battle, and poison the springs of awe and admiration.

They are, indeed, incomparable in their way. They are hackmen in excess; prigs among drivers, because they overdo their extortions: they exalt their calling: they are superhumanly devoid of conscience. Donkey boys at Cairo may be importunate; the *cocher* of Paris may be sulky; the cabby of London may be extortionate; the New York driver may be fond of hurling the luggage at your head as if you were an Aunt Sally, and of charging fifteen dollars for a two-shilling drive; but the Niagara hack combines in himself the evil qualities of all his brethren; alone among men and drivers, he hath no bowels; he would take the last dollar of the orphan, and rob the widow of her mite, on the pretence of 'a dollar and a he'f all the way:' he is a brigand by profession; he is a blot upon the most glorious spot in all the earth; it is he who mixes up with the memory of grandeur undreamed of and splendour inconceivable the incongruities of a bad dream.

He is, I believe, secretly drilled in a species of chariot charge which I have never seen practised anywhere except at the Falls. Thus it is: When the stranger emerges from the hotel, the hackman waits until his victim is well in the middle of the road, and then, with all his band, two score strong, he charges him from all quarters simultaneously. Thus the visitor suddenly finds himself the centre of a radiating wheel of horses, buggies, and hackmen, and, amid the uproar of a shouting like that of the Homeric way of war, he succumbs generally with a yell of terror, to inevitable fate. There is a cloud of dust, a brief struggle, and in half a minute you will catch your last glimpse of the captive—all that is left of him—hurried off in a buggy to see the whirlpool.

Presently, to us discussing these and kindred topics, there was added a son of the house. A long-limbed pleasant-faced boy of seventeen, with an accent more than a little touched by the infectious nasality of Yankee land, and an affectation of Yankee slang. And he joined in the conversation, which presently assumed the character of a monologue. The future of that youth I consider assured. Such fluency, such richness of digressive power, such ready return to the main topic after episodes which might have led astray altogether a less practised hand, can only meet with a proper sphere of action in an auctioneer's pulpit. Auctioneers, as readers of 'Middlemarch' know, talk wild, but they make money.

'Did you ever,' he began, 'hear the story of the murder of Nick Vedder? Well now, that's a true story for sure. And it's all about those very hackmen you've been talking of. My! ain't they just the worst kind? And all alike, all enough to ruin the morals of an archangel. Not a pin to choose between the lot, only some bigger and some cunninger. Jess Connolly is the biggest, and p'raps Seth Messiter is the cunningest. And I suppose that Dick the guide, who's the politest, has done the most murders. Not that the murdering is anything like what it was, and they do say, now, that a stranger can walk along the cliff of an evening and sometimes get back without being chucked over the edge and then robbed, as used to happen regularly. But I don't think I'd try, if I was a stranger. It might be safe; but for certain, there's a good many bodies do turn up every year in the pool, and not one ever yet found with dollars in his pocket. Now how did those pockets get cleared out? Ask the gang. And if I was you, mister, and I wanted to see the silver spray in the moonlight and that, I'd go with a friend or two, unless Dick was drunk that night. In that case, p'raps you'd be safe, and p'raps you wouldn't. But the real merry time was five years ago when the new judge hadn't come here, and before they murdered Nick Vedder. Then they had it all their own way, robbing around all day and highway plundering at night. Just a chance who they caught. There was old Mr. Scadding, for instance, left this very house at nine o'clock with fifty dollars, and only he had the good luck to hide 'em away in the heels of his boots, he'd have lost every individual dollar. It was a dark night, with snow falling soft, so that you couldn't hear footsteps, and all of a sudden the old gentleman, going along soft and easy, and only wishing he was warm in bed, felt a hand, somebody else's hand, which didn't belong to him, in his coat collar. Naturally he stopped short and began to think fast.

'Then a sheet was thrown over his head, and then a voice told him to hand over what he'd got. Of course he concluded at once to say nothing about his boots, and all he'd got outside of them was a quarter-dollar and a five-cent piece. They pulled his pockets inside out, and they cursed considerable, and then they let him go. He didn't need twice to be told to go straight on and never look behind him; and when he took out those dollars from the heel of his boot, like a brand from the burning, it was, as he always used to say, with a thankful heart.

'As for the day jobs, they used to work in partnership. The most eminent firm was probably that of Jess Connolly and Abb Thomas. Abb is dead now, poor fellow!—died of yellow fever in New Orleans, and his wife went all the way there to see if he really was gone. Seemed to her as if Abb never could die; besides, she wanted to marry another man, and she knew how Abb would carry round if he came home after she'd done it. He was six foot high, and the handsomest coloured man in all America, as he always said himself. On sunny days he used to wax his moustache, and twist it to a point six inches each side, like the Emperor Napoleon. When it rained, he would comb it straight over his mouth and chin, so as to look like a blackleaded poet. And he had such a way with him that he never missed his fare. Nobody rightly knows what that way was: some say he threatened to murder the stranger if he didn't get in and be driven off without more words; some say he bundled him in, head and heels, before he knew where he was; but I think he just persuaded him with soft words to the door of his buggy, and then finished him with a gentle shove. Abb always got the pick of the flock, too; the loneliest of the English travellers—that kind of young feller who comes by himself straight out from Oxford, with a field-glass and knickerbockers, and goes home on the brag after he's been pretty well skinned alive in Niagara and the States; the tenderest and unprotectedest of the women; the shakiest of the old men; that was the kind you would always find in Abb Thomas's buggy. And he generally took 'em that quiet and lonely road which leads to the whirlpool. Why did he take them there?

Because, about half-way back, who would meet him but Jess Connolly? Jess was the biggest of the gang, and he had a fist like a frying-pan. He's in chokee now for a year, because he made a mistake, thinking the old times were come back again, and tried to bounce an Englishman out of fifty dollars. But the Englishman had a revolver, and he pointed it at Jess's head. "Drive right away to Mr. Hill," he said—Mr. Hill's the judge—"or I'll shoot." But before this misfortune, in the old days, Jess would meet Abb Thomas on the road, and the buggy would stop. Then Abb would turn round: "Place where the fare always pays," he would say. "This is my partner."

'"Twenty dollars," says Jess, holding out his hand.

'"You said a dollar and a half," says the passenger to Abb.

'"Lord forgive you!" says Abb.

'When they'd taken the twenty dollars, they would turn the victim out upon the road, and drive away together. He was sure to be off the next day most likely, and then both of the men were back upon the bank. Another of the gang was Tom Hudson. He's in chokee too, like Jess Connolly, and for seven years, for trying to murder Laurence, the gaoler. He was taken up for something of no great count—forgery, I think—and at the same time Seth Messiter was brought in for a trifle—clearing out a Yankee's pockets. They were both clapped in the same cell. Tom was mad, because he didn't expect to get off; so he proposed to Seth that they should bounce the gaoler, take the keys, and run. Seth agreed, and when Laurence came in with their evening grub, Tom let him have it once on the head with the wooden bench. Down dropped Laurence, but, as bad luck would have it, he had the sense, before he fell, to chuck the keys through the window-bars. Tom was real ugly when he saw the keys fly through the bars, and made at Laurence like a devil. "Let's kill him!" cries Tom. Now what do you think Seth Messiter did? I said he was the cunningest of the hull lot. He remembered that he was in for a little thing, and Tom was in for a big thing, and he saw that Laurence wasn't hurt, not to say considerable. So he set his two legs astride of the gaoler, and when he saw him open his eyes, he struck an attitude like a bold pirate. "Who strikes Laurence, strikes me!" he said, with flashin' eyes and a thump on his breast. There! It was beautiful.

'At the trial, Tom's forgery case broke down, because his brother, who drove on the American side, had hocussed the principal witness. Then they put him up for trying to murder Laurence, the gaoler. When the evidence came to the heroic conduct of Seth Messiter, there wasn't a dry eye in court. Tom got seven years, and the Yankee who was there to prosecute Seth was ashamed to come forward. Said that he felt as if putting forward his fifty-dollar claim on such a credit to Canada was like prosecuting George Washington, when he was President, for cutting down that pear tree. So he walked over the bridge, and he went home. I think he says now that he'd much rather be robbed by a common man next time, and the commoner the better. Doesn't like heroism and thieving to get mixed.

'Gracious! It's one out and the other in, most times. Often the best friends don't get the chance of an evening together for years, and when they do, there's always the chance of interruption. Same as one night when Abb Thomas and Dick the guide were in the bar of Prospect House together, and word came that Dick was wanted.

'"Poor Dick!" says Abb, "we shan't see you for another year." And they didn't meet again till the day before Nick Vedder was murdered.

'Last year, however, there was a case with a Yankee, who was just a little too sharp, and the men got off. Dan Moriarty it was. He saw a stranger in a store coat and a stove-pipe hat standing by the bridge on the Canadian side, gazing with rapture at the Horseshoe Fall. Moriarty drove up his buggy, so as the stranger was bound to step into that or else to walk over the cliff. Every hackman has his little ways all to himself, and that was Dan Moriarty's. Grantin' that Abb Thomas could lift his passenger in and carry him off, whether he liked it or not, there was no one but Dan who could give him a fair choice between suicide and his buggy.

'But the stranger never moved, and even Dan didn't dare, in broad daylight, to shove him over.

'Presently he extended both his arms in a circular sweep and sung out, just as if he'd sat upon a wasp's nest.

'"Oh!" he says; "this is too much."

'"What's too much?" asks Dan; "not hef a dollar to Table Rock and back."

'"No, *Sir*," says the stranger, "The prospect is what is too much. It's sublime, Sir. It brings the tears to the stranger's eyes."

'"You bet," said Dan. "Step in and have a drive. Tote yer round for two and a quarter."

'"No," said the stranger, meditatively. "Seems as if I'd rether liquor."

'They went together to the nearest bar, and Dan Moriarty paid.

'It was gettin' on for evening and the sun was low. The stranger returned to the Falls and sat down on the edge of the cliff with the stump of a cigar and his pocket-handkerchief. Dan Moriarty sat beside him, and they wept together. When the sun went down, Dan suggested that they should have another drink. So they went off to a crib that Dan knew off, where they found two more of the gang. Here they took drinks around, and Dan proposed a game of euchre. The stranger was through with his weeping, but he hadn't offered to pay for any of the whisky, and he wouldn't play for stakes. All the same, he drank whatever was offered him, and looked as if he could go on drinking for a long time. So when Dan put his hand under the table and pulled out a bottle half emptied, that unsuspicious stranger set it to his lips and didn't take it away till his back teeth were under whisky. Then Dan and his friends looked at each other and smiled cheerful, because the next minute the stranger rolled off his stool like a log. For they'd roped that whisky.

'Next morning the stranger awoke. He was lying on the edge of the cliff; he was very cold, and he had hot coppers; and the worst was that his pockets were empty.

'It was easy to identify the three men, and they were all had up before Mr. Hill. Then the stranger told his tale. He narrated how his guileless nature was worked up to drinkin' point by the poetry of the situation and the sympathy of Dan. And then he said how he'd got $500 in his pockets and had lost all the little pile by the hands of that treacherous villain.

'This looked black for Dan. But he whispered his counsel for a few minutes, and the cross-examination began.

'"Where did you carry that pile of notes?"

'"In my purse," says he.

'"Show the Court your purse."

'He pulled out a purse about big enough to hold a single dime. All the prisoners laughed, and the Court called order.

'"Where did you make your money?"

'"Working at Buffalo for two months, at two dollars a day."

'"That makes $120. Where did you get the rest?"

'Well, you see this greedy Yank, he'd been drugged and robbed, and he thought he'd go in for a big claim at once. He'd learned how that dodge pays from the Alabama commission. The subsequents were that Dan got off, and the Court told the witness he was a liar.

'But the most wonderful escape the gang ever had was in the murder of Nick Vedder, that I've been coming to gradually.

'It was five years ago. Nick was a young fellow of twenty-one or so, clerk to a dry goods store in Cliftonville. He was a good-looking chap, and on Sunday afternoons dressed himself up like a Buffalo swell, wore an allround pot with a feather in it, and had a little moustache growing up like a pumpkin in a frame. When he came out o' church you could see by his eyes that he knew all the girls were in love with him, and was only anxious to save one heart from being broken by lettin' on in good time that her love was returned. He parted his hair beautifully right down the middle, so as you might walk straight up if you liked, and finished at the parting with two sweet little curls over his marble brow, so as you could hang on if you slipped.

'It was one Sunday evening in February, while the ice was hanging about the Falls, and there had been toboggining all afternoon down by the ferry. Nick was there, and after it he went to church, just to cheer up the gells, and after church he started to go home. It was a black night, and somehow, through seeing the last of the sweet things go out, Nick was behind all the rest. But he thought nothing of that, and just walked along the planks whistling to himself, till he felt all of a sudden the grip of two arms round his neck and two hands on his lips.

'Nick liked philandering better than fighting, and when he felt that two pair of foreign arms about him, he just stood still where he was, and concluded to let things slide. What inspired Nick with prayerful gratitude was that he hadn't any money in his pocket, not a single dollar, note, nor the chink of one quarter against another. Dry goods store clerks don't have much money as a rule.

'They carried him without a word down the cross-road which leads from Clifton Church to the Drummondville road, and presently they came to a house, and they took him in.

'Just then Nick Vedder fainted. P'raps it was the heat of the stove, and p'raps it was the skear, but anyhow he went off, and when he came to himself he was lying on his back upon the floor. They'd set a chair across his legs, and one citizen was sitting in it, a pistol in his hand, ready cocked, pointed straight at Nick Vedder's face. He felt, without being told, that if that pistol went off, he'd lose considerable of his beauty for the balance of his days; so he hoped it wouldn't. But that wasn't all. At his right side there sat another gentleman, with a razor in his hand, and this he was playfully drawin' across Nick Vedder's throat; and at his left there was a third citizen, who held a pair of scissors open, like compasses, across his cheeks.

'"Nick Vedder," said the one in the chair, and he knew it was Chris Dalmage, "Nick Vedder, what the devil do you mean by it?"

'"Mean by it, Sir?" asks Nick, as meek as he knew.

'"We see a gentleman going along, on a dark night, easy and quiet over the planks; we stop that gentleman, and he turns out to be Nick Vedder, clerk in a dry goods store, without a cent. And we've wasted our time. An example must be made, Nick Vedder."

'Then Nick saw that his time was come unless he made an effort, so, because he didn't dare to move, on account of the scissors and the razor, to say nothing of the pistol, he prayed on his back, that they would have pity on a poor dry goods store clerk, who had always, from his humble station, envied the glorious freedom of the hackmen. He had, he said, watched them when the helpless tourist crossed the Suspension Bridge or emerged from the Clifton Hotel. He drew a poetic picture of that tourist, confident as the Gallic cock at starting, and returning like that bird plucked and trussed ready for roasting. Warming with his subject, because Nick was a real clever fellow once put to it, he compared, to the advantage of each in turn, the bold privateering of Abb Thomas, by whom the tourist, surrounded on all sides, was fairly captured and driven whither he did not wish to go; the suicidal alternative of Dan Moriarty, which presented death or the buggy to the terrified stranger; the craft of Mr. Seth Messiter, and the admirable politeness of that other excellent citizen, Dick the guide. I think he would have gone on all night, but Abb Thomas told him they didn't want any more chin music, and that his time was up.

'Nick was mighty frightened. When they tied a napkin round his neck he began to cry; when they sharpened the razor he began to say his prayers; and when Tom Hudson advanced with the weapon in his hand he began to skreek. But he needn't have been so skeared, because, after all, they weren't going to cut his throat. They only made the beautiful centre-parting in his hair a little wider, and shaved him an inch broad from his forehead to his poll. Then Nick Vedder looked like a clown.

'It was Abb Thomas—he was always rough in his play—who said Nick was a pretty boy, and would look well in earrings if he only had his ears pierced. So he took the scissors and did the job for him. After that they let Nick go, and when he got home he felt real ugly—more ugly he felt, and smaller too, in the morning. His mother, when he showed up at breakfast, carried on so shameful, that he was forced to go straight to Mr. Hill and lodge his complaint.

'They soon caught the men, and though they said it was only a joke, Mr. Hill bound them over, all but one, against whom there was no evidence, to appear the following week. No one in the town knew whether it was burglary, or highway robbery, or plain assault. If it was highway robbery, the town was likely to be deprived of its most prominent citizens for a good long spell.

‘The next Sunday night, the night before the remand, Nick did not go to church: he couldn’t, because his hair hadn’t grown over the bald place yet. His mother, who was a Primitive Methodist, and strict, did. When she was out of the house and the bells had done ringing, these four citizens, out on bail, dropped in in a friendly way, and paid an evening call on poor Nick. They didn’t ask him if he’d like a walk that cold night, but they took it for granted; clapped a gag in his mouth, wrapped him up in his warm great-coat, tied a comforter round his neck, and took him along of themselves. “Because,” said Abb Thomas, “if you so much as wink, to show that you are not going of your own free will, when anyone passes, we’ll split your skull.”

‘Nick went very quiet, but he was more frightened this journey than the last. They walked up the road from Clifton, along the rapids, where it’s dark all the year round, moon or no moon, with the woods one side and the roaring river, three hundred feet below, on the other, and they crossed over the suspension bridge, nobody saying a word. Then they turned to the right, past Prospect Park till they reached Goat Island Bridge, and they crossed over the bridge to that lonely and picturesque location.

'It's a very different thing being on Goat Island in the daytime, when you can see as well as hear the rapids above you and the falls beneath, and you know where you're standing, to being there on a cold, dark, Sabbath night in winter, in the company of four virtuous hackmen, uncertain how long you're going to be with them, the icy spray blowing into your eyes, the leafless branches dropping their icicles on your head, your feet crunching deep in the falling snow, and all the time the cataract and rapids about you, roaring like all the wild creatures of all the Zoological Gardens in the wide, wide world.

'Nick Vedder was very sorry just then that he wasn't in church; although his head *was* shaved for an inch all up his precious scalp; better to be laughed at by the girls, than be dragged along to be murdered by the hackmen. I guess his heart was about down to the heels of his boots as he went along.

'It's a quarter of a mile, I s'pose, across Goat Island, unless you make it longer by taking in Luna Isle, and this would have been a waste of time for Nick's enemies, because they were bound straight for Terrapin Tower. You know Terrapin Tower, mister. They've taken the tower down long ago, to prevent its tumbling down, but the shaky wooden footway to it is there still, and then you can walk clear out to where it stood right over the side of the fall, so that a man standing at the edge of that ramshackle pier has got his foot within a few inches of the great flood which rolls over the edge below him. It is a skeary place on a sunshiny day in summer. Think what it would be on a moonless night in February, with the black waters rolling and roaring beneath; above, the clear sky, and on the rocks around the snow and ice making with their whiteness a little light, just to show how horrible it would be to go over.

'Three of the men dragged poor Nick to the end of the planks. Then they lifted him up—Nick by this time was long past the power of praying, or even asking for mercy—and held him right out over the fall.

'"Nick Vedder," said Abb Thomas, as solemn as a judge, "Air you proposin' to give evidence against us to-morrow?"

'There was no answer, because Nick was too paralysed with terror to say anything.

'"One," said Abb. "If I say *three* before an answer comes—over you go. And the Lord have mercy on what's left of you, when you get to the bottom."

'There was no answer.

'"Two!"

. . . . . .

'Next day all the men, leaving their buggies outside, appeared in the court at ten o'clock looking cheerful. But when the case was called there was no Nick Vedder.

'The charge was dismissed, but the judge cautioned the prisoners. He said he had no doubt that there was an evasion of justice somehow, and that a serious outrage had been condoned. Let it be a lesson to them, for it was the last time—and so on.

'Later on, old Mrs. Vedder came into court screamin' and cryin' that her son must be murdered, that he hadn't come home all night, and that he was certainly made away with by the blood-thirsty gang of Abb Thomas and his friends. But there was no proof.

'That was Monday. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday passed, and Nick never came home. Everybody thought that he really must have been made away with. A reward was offered for him. People began to look more shy of the men on the bank than ever. Abb Thomas was hooted by the women. Chris Dalmage had a quarrel with his own wife, who threatened to live no longer with a murderin' cut-throat. And even old Mis' Fuller, who ought to have known better, through her English high connections, put on all her six frocks at once, went down to the bank and joined in the general scream. It was an anxious time. And it was more anxious still, when, on Friday morning, it was spread abroad that a body was in the whirlpool.

'We all made for the whirlpool. Some walked, some drove: but we all got there. In the pool, goin' round and round, was a body, and no mistake. It went round and round the whole day, while we stood on the bank under the cliff and tried to make out if it was Nick Vedder. But the features were smashed beyond recognition.

'So many people crowded down that all the buggies were hired, and it was noticed afterwards, as a most remarkable thing, that the visitors that day were actually enabled to see the Falls without being robbed. No hackmen on the bank, no photographers, and no dealers in Indian curiosities. The tourists thought it was Sunday, or a keeping of Dominion Day at the wrong time.

'In the night the body left the whirlpool, and was found on the bank in the morning, caught by the trees. They brought it up, and held the inquest.

'Although the face and features were quite smashed and broken, there were two things by which they identified the remains. Old Mrs. Vedder swore to a slipper which was on the foot as belonging to her son; and Dick the guide, who had reason of his own for wanting to see Abb Thomas in trouble, swore to a tattoo mark on the arm. Said he did it himself one Sabbath afternoon when Nick Vedder and him was alone. And a coloured girl swore that she saw Nick Vedder on Sunday evening with four men, Abb Thomas being one, and going over the suspension bridge.

'The verdict was "wilful murder" against the four who had been bound over to appear for the first charge. They were immediately arrested and locked up. They took the matter quite cheerfully, and were, as the "Drummondville Gazette" said, apparently quite regardless of their awful position.

'Time was required to get up the case for the prosecution, and it was a fortnight afterwards when the real trial came on. It was a solemn sight to see the judge, the counsel, the jury, and the citizens, all got together to hang four hack drivers. Everybody was there, and among them old Mis' Fuller, in the front row, nodding her head at all friends, and every now and then wiping her eyes when she thought of poor dear Nick.

'First the prosecutor opened the case. A man had disappeared; for no reason whatever he vanished from his home: when last seen he was in company with four men; these men stood before the court in the dock: with them he crossed over the bridge to Goat Island: the gate-keeper, it would be proved, could not remember whether he came back with them: they had an interest in getting him out of the way: a body was found in the whirlpool below the Falls: in height it corresponded to the deceased, Nicholas Vedder: on the foot was a slipper to which the murdered man's mother would swear: on the arm was a tattoo mark which a well-known citizen of Clifton remembered to have himself punctured on the arm of this unfortunate young man so foully made away with.

'He kept pilin' it up about foul play and the murdered man till the folk were ready to lynch the lot if the prisoners had been free. Then he called the evidence. First the coloured girl gave hers. The counsel for the prisoners said he had no questions to ask. Then Mrs. Vedder swore to the slipper, and was quite ready to swear to the foot which had been in it.

'The counsel for the prisoners, to everybody's astonishment, said he had no questions at all to ask her. Was the man going to fool away the case?

'Dick the guide swore to the tattoo mark. When asked if he remembered the date of the tattooing, he burst into tears and said it was when Nick and he were boys together. That was curious, because Dick was forty and Nick was twenty.

‘But the counsel for the defence said he had no questions to ask of him neither. And then we began to feel as if the rope was round all four necks.

‘When his turn to speak came, however, he rose to his feet, and said that he only had one witness to call. He would call—and here he hesitated, and looked scornful at his brothers in the law: he would call—and here he looked with a smile in the faces of the citizens: he would call—and here he looked full in the eyes of the jury, as if he was going to let them have a facer: he would call—NICK VEDDER himself: and as he spoke the words, the door opened, and in came Nick. His hair was growing again very nicely. But he looked meek and small. There's no denying that the Court was a good deal taken aback: dignity shook out of it, somehow. Mis' Fuller gave a fearful shriek because she thought it was a ghost, and went off into hysterics. It took a few minutes to get rid of her. The people jumped to their feet and began to shout. The jury looked as if they'd been done out of something good. And as for the prisoners, they just stepped over the dock into the court and sat down, Abb Thomas the first, without being invited to.

'We got a little quiet after a while, and the case went on.

'First the counsel told the Court the story about Nick's disappearance. It was this: Chris Dalmage, the only one of the five who wasn't bound over, after they'd frightened Nick at Terrapin Tower, till he was as meek as any two-year-old, kept him on the other side, locked up with a friend or two to take care of him. After the inquest, what with the general excitement, and the impulse to the hack trade, because folk came from Hamilton and Toronto and London to see the place where Nick Vedder's body was found, and what with the pleasure of seeing his friends all locked up together, a thing which no hackman could resist, Chris could not bring himself to produce his prisoner till the day of the trial.

'The counsel only asked two questions.

'"Is that your slipper?"

'"No," said Nick. "I never had a slipper in my life, and if I had my foot isn't as big as a boat. And who'd go out in slippers in such weather as this?"

'His mother, who'd been clinging to him and wiping her eyes, let go of his hand, and looked as if she'd like to box his ears there and then.

'"Oh! you ungrateful boy," she cried.

'"Then," said the counsel, "show the Court your left arm. Turn up the sleeve; where is the tattoo?"

'"There is no tattoo," said Nick. "Why should I be tattooed?"

'Dick the guide stepped out of court. He said it was a curious and disappointing world—and who would have guessed that the boy would round on him in such an ungrateful manner as that after all he'd said and sworn to for his sake? And catch him ever taking any interest in a murder again. And that night there was some of them at the Falls had a real high time: perhaps as high a time as ever was had. But Dick the guide wasn't invited.'

THE END.

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